

Syracuse University

## SURFACE

---

Cultural Foundations of Education -  
Dissertations & Theses

School of Education

---

8-2013

# The Other Side of Girls Gone Wild: The Emotional Labor of College Women's Sexual Decision-Making

Leah A. Flynn

Follow this and additional works at: [https://surface.syr.edu/cfe\\_etd](https://surface.syr.edu/cfe_etd)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Flynn, Leah A., "The Other Side of Girls Gone Wild: The Emotional Labor of College Women's Sexual Decision-Making" (2013). *Cultural Foundations of Education - Dissertations & Theses*. 58.

[https://surface.syr.edu/cfe\\_etd/58](https://surface.syr.edu/cfe_etd/58)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Cultural Foundations of Education - Dissertations & Theses by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact [surface@syr.edu](mailto:surface@syr.edu).

## ABSTRACT

This research concerns the process of college women's emotional labor in sexual decision-making and how women talk about their sexual decisions via their negotiation of dominant social discourses. The study seeks to determine how the college experience nurtures women's sexual subjectivity; how it affects their negotiation of sexual messaging and social dominant discourse; and how it impacts the emotional work involved in the process. The study was conducted at three college campuses that vary relative to institutional type (i.e., public vs. private), social class, and race. The research was conducted in fall 2006 at Center State University, and in the spring and summer 2010 semesters at Northeast University and Upper Lake Community College. The qualitative study involved eight focus groups and 20 in-depth interviews and a total of 48 participants. Out of those 48, three women identified themselves as lesbian, three as bisexual, two as asexual, and one as queer. Two women chose not to identify. In regard to racial make-up, 36 women were white and the remainder identified as African American, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Latina, Korean, and Southeast Asian. All participants were of traditional college age (18 to 21), except for three women in their late 20s and early 30s. The forms of emotional labor that emerged were (a) how women understood and talked about the regulatory expectations and social norms of women's sexuality and how regulation *shapes* subjectivity, (b) how women's negotiation of those regulations in juxtaposition with their sexual desire *demonstrates* sexual subjectivity (c) how college served—and was perceived as—a “bubble” for women to more fully engage in acts of resistance and agency in response to gendered social expectations within a space that *nurtured* sexual subjectivity. Ultimately, the study focuses on young women's negotiation of sexuality and the emotional work that their talk

reflects; it exposes ways in which women are thoughtful and reflective in their sexual decision-making while engaging with their sexual subjectivity.

THE OTHER SIDE OF GIRLS GONE WILD: THE EMOTIONAL LABOR OF COLLEGE  
WOMEN'S SEXUAL DECISION-MAKING

By

Leah A. Flynn  
B.A. Nazareth College, 1998  
M.S. Syracuse University, 2003

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Foundations of Education  
in the Graduate School of Syracuse University

August 2013

Copyright 2013 Leah A. Flynn

All rights Reserved

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following individuals for their contributions, time, and support in making this study possible: First, Sari Knopp Biklen, my dissertation advisor, for her guidance, knowledge, and patience throughout my academic career here at Syracuse University; the story I tell in this paper has been shaped by all that I have learned from her. I thank Cathy Engstrom and Gretchen Lopez, who are not only members of my dissertation committee, but also two women who gave me their unwavering support and guidance as a student and as a person. I also owe deep gratitude to my peers and colleagues, especially Julie Rawls White, my mentor and dear friend; Carrie Grogan Abbott, my best friend and confidante; and Jeff Gallant, my partner in life who has taught me more than there is space to write. They offered support and encouragement throughout my time as a doctoral student; they were my personal “cheerleaders,” who motivated me to pick up the pen every day. I want to recognize my family and friends for all of their love, support, and patience, especially when I had to sacrifice spending time with them in order to spend time with this study. I love you all.

Most importantly, I thank the women who volunteered their voices to this study. Without their willingness to be open with me about such a private topic, this dissertation would not have been possible. Although many thanked me for giving them an opportunity to talk about sex, the thanks goes all go to them. You are all beautiful and powerful women! Agentive and honest during a time when it is difficult to ask questions and be heard about female sexuality. This work is dedicated to you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	24
CHAPTER 3. METHODS AND PROCEDURES: THE FOCUS GROUP, THE INTERVIEW, AND THE EXPLORATION OF THE THREE SITES OF STUDY .....	53
CHAPTER 4. THE REGULATION OF FEMALE SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITY VIA SOCIAL DISCOURSES AND GENDERED SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS; THE MAINTENANCE OF THE “GOOD GIRL” IMAGE .....	82
CHAPTER 5. NEGOTIATING SEXUAL DESIRE AND THE POWER OF SEXUAL AUTHORITY .....	155
CHAPTER 6. EXERCISING SEXUAL AGENCY WITHIN THE “BUBBLE” OF THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE; NEGOTIATED WORK OF RESISTANCE AND EXPLORATION.....	214
CONCLUSION.....	264
EPILOGUE.....	281
REFERENCES .....	283
APPENDIX A.....	290
APPENDIX B .....	292
APPENDIX C .....	294

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

I'm not gonna lie. When I came to college, I had this perception, probably from TV shows or movies, that you go to college and life is good . . . and you're powerful if people are sexually attracted to you, and you can have sex with anybody you want and it's no big deal. Guess what I did? The first two weeks of school, I did that and it fucked me up. Like I came [to college] thinking that it's really okay to just hook up with somebody and I realized that it's not. You know, for some women, maybe it is. Getting men to wanna have sex with you, it doesn't mean you're powerful, it doesn't mean that you're even respected.

But, I'm also frustrated because it's true, some women, it's almost like that because they want to have sex all the time, somehow that means that they've got a loss of control or they're just too emotional, or they've got some quality about them that's negative. Although that's fine for a guy, a woman is supposed to have more composure, she's supposed to have more self-respect . . . that somehow, by having sex, it's like you [as a woman] lose that. I'm not going to lie, I love sex, sex is fantastic. I can have sex whenever I want with whomever I want. However, I know from personal experience, since I've been in college, that it [sex] is a much more fulfilling experience when it's with someone you actually care about, you know?

—Eva, 19 years old, straight, white

Eva, the college sophomore quoted above, was working to negotiate her sexual subjectivity in college. She understood the social-regulatory expectations that are placed upon a woman's sexuality and that there are consequences to being a sexually active woman in our



society; any feeling she might have had of being “powerful” is now diminished because of these standards, set by dominant social guidelines.

In this study, I draw on Tolman’s (2002) definition of sexual subjectivity as “a person’s experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being” (pp. 5–6). In her research on young women and sexual desire, Tolman found that when her participants talked about their sexuality, they did not talk spontaneously about their *own* desire, but instead spoke of others’ desires. They talked about what men desire from women sexually, or said that parents want their daughters to remain abstinent, or be “good girls.” Thus, women’s sexual subjectivity is compromised by dominant discursive influences and others’ (partners’, families’, friends’) expectations of them. Emotional labor, the organizing concept of this work, shapes subjectivities because of how women manage decisions about sex in tandem with how they understand discourse. “Discourse shapes not just *what* we see, but *how* we see” (Phillips, 2000, 16).

For example, women have to negotiate their sexual subjectivity in relief against how they are portrayed in the media, particularly through media that privilege male sexuality. *Girls Gone Wild*, a direct-to-video series documenting young college women (primarily white, straight, and middle-class women) exposing their bare bodies on camera, was made popular by a 32-year-old media entrepreneur, Joe Francis, in the early 2000s (Pitcher, 2006). Francis explained that, for these videos, he was specifically looking to film the naked bodies of “girls next door”—or, in his words, “real girls”—instead of “nasty sex chicks with tattoos and piercings” (Pitcher, 2006, 203). These videos profiled women performing “bad girl antics” in a “good girl body,” and thus

solidify the contradictory messages young women must negotiate when it comes to their sexuality (Pitcher, 2006, 203). Furthermore, these videos articulate a college “hyperreality,” focused on a white, straight, middle-class subject that is typically not eroticized or hypersexualized by the media in the way that black or Latina women are (Pitcher, 2006). The videos showcase an ideological sexual object, a white college woman who is acting “bad” on spring break, but who is typically framed as a “good girl.”

Being a “good girl” is a discourse that women grappled with throughout this study. “Discourses both reflect and give shape to the ways we conceptualize, question and talk about things . . . they instruct us how to think and speak and act in ways and identify as part of some socially meaningful group” (Phillips, 2000, p. 12). Women develop subjectivities in accordance with social discourses. Exposing women’s sexuality for public viewing is nothing new; Francis’s soft-core porn videos of near-naked women gyrating for the camera demonstrate a current representation of a long and racialized history of society’s view of women “going wild” when it comes to sex. Francis’ videos may be extreme, but many other forms of media sexualize and objectify young women in particular ways. Studies show that women more often than men are depicted in sexualizing and objectified manners (e.g., wearing revealing and provocative clothing, portrayed in ways that emphasize their body parts and sexual readiness, serving as decorative objects)” in media such as commercials, prime-time television programs, movies, music videos, sports media, video games and Internet sites (Szymanski, Moffitt & Carr, 2011, p. 10).

For example, representations of women of color in hip-hop and rap videos *solidify* the image of these women as vixens and bad girls, whereas the *Girls Gone Wild* videos position white women as *acting* bad. Both types of videos portray women as objects of men's gratification. Furthermore, many television shows and movies have their lead actresses dress and act suggestively for the main character's (typically a straight male's) benefit. Women do not hold a serious role in these films and are instead cast as a girlfriend, wife or object of lust for male actors. Choices made by the media industry communicate to the audience that these actresses' worth is measured by her sexuality and not by her acting talent. Another example of sexual objectification is magazine and television advertisements. In order to increase product sales among men, television and magazine advertisements use scantily-dressed young women to tease or flirt suggestively in front of the camera. These types of ads are directed at a straight male audience, such as sports, car or beer ads. For example, *Axe* body wash products for men utilize the excuse of "the growing statistics of women being hotter" as a reason for men to purchase their product and better attract women. In addition, a variety of fashion designers have been under scrutiny for their ads that position female models as victims of violent acts perpetuated by men, such as rape or other forms of abuse. Photographers argue that their work is "art", but it is apparent that models are used as sexualized objects in the ads in an attempt to increase sales (Duffy, 2013).

These forms of media solidify the hetero-normative sexualization of women by positioning women as objects of *straight male* sexual satisfaction, not as thinking, feeling and desiring subjects who have ownership of their sexuality. Furthermore, it provides a skewed

understanding of women's sexuality and agency by eliminating their voices and desires from the overall picture. The literature review expands upon the subject of the sexual objectification of women in more detail.

My study is intended to expose another side of women's sexuality, in contrast to films like those made by Francis and by dominant social representations. This research demonstrates instead that women are thoughtful in their decision-making; that their sexual subjectivity, which at times is exposed for public display, is complicated; and that the women society visualizes as "wild" are in fact thoughtful and engaged sexual subjects as opposed to objects. I demonstrate how the college experience can nurture women's subjectivity.

Throughout data collection, I found that women often questioned their sexuality (behaviors, actions, sexual identity) once they made a sexual decision and then worked to connect it to their sexual subjectivity. For example, they might have asked themselves: Do I fit in with others at college? Am I the only person here having (or not having) sex? How might my decision affect me as a daughter, partner, friend, or student? Will my partner leave me if I don't have sex? Will my friends judge me for having sex "too soon" or not at all? What if my roommates think I'm a slut? What if my parents find out that I am sexually active? The question that I found to be the most common was, Am I "normal"? As Kathleen Bogle argued in her 2008 study on "hooking up" on college campuses, "Most college students want to know what is 'normal'; because understanding the norms for their peer group helps them to navigate their own sexual lives" (p. 72).

The work that women did when attempting to answer these questions is the emotional labor I plan to interrogate within this study. In this introductory chapter, I will talk about (a) the context of the study; (b) what questions I will explore in the dissertation and why they are important to the study; (c) the significance of emotional labor within my study and why analyzing women's talk and discourse is key to understanding how emotional labor works; (d) how I complicate the issue of sexual desire and subjectivity among these forms of emotional labor; (e) and why I chose to study college women's sexual decision-making.

### **The Context of the Study**

This study of college women was situated within three colleges in urban upstate New York. They were all nondenominational and mostly residential (Upper Lake Community College is mostly nonresidential, although it does have residence halls on campus), meaning that women were often living on their own for the first time, independent from traditional authority figures such as parents and other family members. The initial site for the pilot study, Center State University (CSU), is a small, doctoral granting public university with approximately 2,300 undergraduate and graduate students, less than 10% of them students of color, and academic programs are specifically geared toward environmental sustainability. Another site for this dissertation study was a mid-sized private university, Northeast University (NU). At the time, NU enrolled approximately 19,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Here, 55% of those students were from out of state, 10% were international, and 22% were students of color. Women comprised 49% of the student population, and 19% of the women were active in sororities. The third site was a community college, Upper Lake Community College (ULCC), where total

enrollment was approximately 9,500 students; students of color comprised 13% of the population, and 90% of the overall population received some sort of financial aid. Although ULCC is primarily nonresidential, most of the women I interviewed lived in the residence halls. My intention in choosing both sites was to learn about a range of women's experiences that crossed boundaries of race, class, and sexual orientation.

This dissertation involved focus groups and interviews conducted in the 2010 spring semester, as well as research from the pilot study in 2006, to examine college women's talk about sex and the negotiation of sexual discourse within their talk. The college sites described above varied relative to institutional type (i.e., public vs. private), social class, and race. The women participants represented a range of sexual experiences (from a woman who had never had sex before to a woman who had had one consistent partner and to a woman who had had many partners) and sexual identities (e.g., gay, lesbian, straight, queer). Participants lived on campus and/or in nearby housing with roommates.

Through their discussions in focus groups and interviews, I aimed to understand the emotional labor these women engaged in and what it meant for them in defining and understanding their own sexual desire. An analysis of college women's narratives about sex can provide a perspective on the social views of women's sexuality that is different than what has been portrayed in the media; such an analysis can assist educators to move past the ideological differentiation between good and bad girl and provide more guidance for women to acknowledge and negotiate their sexual desire (Tolman, 2002). Through my study of emotional labor and its overall process relative to women's sexual decision-making, I hope to demonstrate that women's

sexual decision-making is thoughtful; it is not driven by what society might consider to be a decision fueled by alcohol; nor do all women “go wild” simply because they are in college. Therefore, I hope to speak back to current research on women’s sexuality that often positions college women’s sexual decision-making in a context of alcohol use or sexual gate-keeping, thereby ignoring the impact of a culture that privileges male sexual desire and silences women’s; instead, I hope to expose the thoughtfulness that goes into women’s sexual decision-making processes and how women understand themselves as sexual subjects caught in a web of contradictory and regulated social messaging and discourse.

### **Framing the Questions of the Dissertation**

This dissertation investigates the thoughtfulness of women in regard to their sexual identities and the work that women do to negotiate their sexual subjectivity within powerful and prominent social discourses. How was the sexual subjectivity of women shaped by the emotional labor that they did in negotiating or resisting regulatory gendered discourses? How is that labor revealed through their talk? How did women’s talk help move them through varying levels of sexual decision-making, and how do they use this talk to seek validation by peers, the researcher, and their own selves? How did the management of desire via emotional labor affect women’s sexual decision-making and negotiated talk? And how did emotional labor connect to sexual gatekeeping and women being educated to “say no” instead of being educated about what it means to say yes to sex?

Michelle Fine (1988) argues that “whether in the classroom or on the street, at work, at home, the young female’s sexuality is negotiated by, for and despite the young woman herself”

(p. 35). Eva's quotation in the beginning, and Fine's argument, capture what my dissertation proposes to do: investigate the process of emotional labor involved in women's sexual decision-making through interrogating the regulation of women's sexuality and how women work to negotiate and resist such regulation within the context of the college experience. In doing this, I expose the three themes or struggles that I found women experience as part of the overall process of emotional work (understanding regulation, negotiation, and resistance) and solidify emotional work as a thoughtful, engaging, and complicated process that is always messy and colored in shades of gray as opposed to binary categories. I talk about (a) how women understood and talked about the regulatory expectations and social norms that are established in regard to their sexuality and how regulation *shapes* subjectivity, (b) how women's negotiation of those regulations in juxtaposition with their sexual desire *demonstrates* sexual subjectivity (c) how college served—and was perceived as—a “bubble” for women to more fully engage in acts of resistance and agency in response to gendered social expectations within a space that *nurtured* sexual subjectivity. How did women articulate their desire and why did their expressions of desire always entail some level of emotional work?

To frame the study's questions, I use Chris Wheedon's (1987) theoretical work on poststructural feminism. She understands the subject as “socially constructed in discursive practices, yet she none the less existed as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices.” The subject, in fact, is not only able to engage with and negotiate discourses, but also is an agent capable of resisting discourse because of how it contrasts with her sexual subjectivity.



Wheeldon (1987) further argues that a subject has the ability to reflect upon socially prominent discourses and to choose from options that are available to [her] through negotiation of discourse and work to build upon sexual subjectivity. Keeping these available options that Wheeldon described in mind, I am interested in looking at not only how women understood regulatory and gendered dominant discourses, but in what ways they engaged with, negotiated, and resisted these discourses through a poststructural lens. The study's overall questions are the following: How do women think about their sexual pleasure? In what ways have they come to learn about their sexual subjectivity? What did their sexual education look like? What outside influences (if any) are involved with their decision-making? How do they come to make sexual decisions? These questions are important to my study because they not only assist in highlighting particular ways in which women were thoughtful in sexual decision-making, but they also allow us to shift the lens away from women as sexual objects, and instead look at them as active sexual *subjects*.

### **What Is Emotional Labor and Why Does it Matter?**

Eva was a participant in a pilot study I facilitated in the fall of 2006 at CSU. The pilot study was instrumental in framing my dissertation because through that experience I learned that it was rarely an easy decision for the women to engage in sexual activity with a partner. Instead, women engaged in different forms of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983)—or the management of feeling in order to fit within society's norms—and negotiation of their sexuality. My understanding of, and how I talk about, emotional labor is supported by Arlie Hochschild's (1983) work on emotional labor and Megan Boler's (1999) theory of emotion and social control. I draw from Hochschild's (1983) definition of emotional labor to talk about how female

sexuality and sexual desire are negotiated and regulated by social discourses. Both Boler and Hochschild's arguments will be further described in the literature review.

I utilize the term *negotiation* in this study to describe the ways that women engaged with, understood, and revised current dominant standards and social regulations. Negotiation was the emotional labor that women undertook in order to exercise their sexual subjectivity, and I found that it pervaded their decision-making. I chose to study emotional labor in order to understand how women came to make sexual decisions situated within a dominant, heterosexualized context where male sexual desire is privileged and women's sexual subjectivity is regulated and often silenced. When it comes to women's sexual subjectivity, studying the concept of emotional labor is particularly important because the process is gendered and complex; it shapes sexual decision-making and exerts control over women's sexual agency. I am doing this study now *because* everyone (ranging from state politicians to youth in school cafeterias) is talking about sex. To be sexually subjective, you need to talk about sex. Through the participants talk, I will show how women's emotional labor emerged as gendered invisible labor in reaction to their negotiation of social discourses. What I hope to show in this study is that women's sexual desire never occurs in a vacuum; it is always politically contested within a dominant ideological context.

Drawing on these conversations, I explored the range of ways women talked about sex. The forms of emotional work that emerged from the discussions and that I define and describe relative to female sexuality in the three data chapters of this study are (a) the contestation of women's understanding of the regulatory dominant social discourses and socially defined roles (e.g., women actively avoiding being labeled a "slut" in order to maintain their image as a good

girl); (b) the negotiation of sexual desire in order to fit within society's expectations and through their engagement with regulatory dominant social discourses; and (c) the college experience as a site for exploration of one's sexuality and engagement in the resistance of social norms in order to express an identity and/or desires (e.g., the "coming-out" process for those women who identified as lesbian or bisexual). I found that women worked within these categories in different contexts when making sexual decisions. I organize my chapters, first, by addressing the literature that grounds my research, second, by describing my methodological choices, and third, by presenting data on the struggles of regulation, negotiation, and the college experience as a site for agency and resistance. I conclude by presenting the dissertation's significance and implications.

### **Data's Components of Emotional Work: Regulation, Negotiation, and Resistance**

Eva's emotional labor in the beginning quotation is demonstrated in a number of ways: her resistance and acceptance of sexual pleasure, recognizing the influence of society's contradictory messages about what sex is like in college ("that you can have sex with anybody you want and it's no big deal"); her understanding of dominant sexual discourses of female sexuality (that bad women "do it" with anyone and good girls "don't" *unless* they are in a relationship); and the consequences that follow if women choose to go against this discourse ("it fucked me up"). Emotional work stemmed from young women trying to negotiate these social discourses. For example, I found through my research that some instances of emotional work for college women could be, but were not limited to, (a) talking with peers about their sexual activities and comparing those experiences with their own; (b) policing other women on what

they thought was “appropriate” relative to sexual activities; (c) being policed by others (peers, family, the media) on their sexual activities; (d) experiencing anxiety over what family and friends think—and seeking their approval—about their sexual activities; and (e) engaging in acts of resistance, such as coming out sexually to others and defining what they enjoyed relative to sexual pleasure. These and other instances will be discussed in more detail within the data chapters.

Examples are given in the three data chapters on regulation, negotiation, and resistance in specific subtexts. The first data chapter explores the regulation of women’s sexual subjectivity through gendered social expectations, such as the good girl image, situated within the context of the larger dominant society. How is the good girl image represented in the data by how women talked about how families, peers, partners, and educational institutions policed them?

In the second data chapter on negotiation, I look at how women negotiated and engaged with their sexual subjectivity within a dominant ideological context. More specifically, how did women work to understand and negotiate their sexuality in juxtaposition to how they are regulated by society? What role did outside figures acting as sexual authorities have in women’s sexual subjectivity? I artificially separated the two data chapters on regulation and negotiation.

In the chapter on regulation I emphasize how women talked about how they saw themselves regulated by others. I talk about how women used what they understood about these regulations, and negotiated their understanding in particular ways among ideological norms. While some of the data I present in the chapter on regulation may demonstrate an act of negotiation and/or resistance by women, my intent was to represent how the data capture

women's narration of *how* they were regulated, and how they worked to manage their sexual decisions as a result. Negotiation was a component of emotional labor that was embedded throughout the emotional labor process; women had to negotiate how they were regulated and also had to negotiate ways to resist these regulations. However, I chose to emphasize negotiation in the second data chapter in order to demonstrate that women first needed to understand and describe types of regulation before they worked to negotiate it.

The third data chapter focuses on college as a site of resistance and sexual exploration that women engaged in relative to gendered societal expectations and how they exercised their sexual agency. In this chapter, I talk about ways in which some participants referred to college as a “bubble” in their discussions and how some women used being in college as an opportunity to explore their sexuality removed from the policing of others, such as parents, teachers, and old friends. The atmosphere that college created separated participants from the “outside” or “real” world and, for many women, removed them from their parents’ watchful eyes. For example, residential students are able to eat, sleep, attend events, work, and take classes without having to leave campus. Thus, for them, the college campus is like a cocoon or “bubble,” where students can live within the confines of the property. I ask, why is college seen as a space where women could explore more freely and shape their sexuality and subjectivity? How did they work to utilize options available to them in order to resist regulation and surveillance? And how did college provide them the space in which to do so? I also interrogate ways in which women thought about their sexuality as college students; looking back, what suggestions would they

have for a sexual education curriculum in secondary school? What did they learn about themselves as college students in terms of their sexuality?

Although the participants in my study had varied levels of sexual experience, they all demonstrated emotional labor, which was a contested and gendered process. They talked about sex in varied ways—in the context of families, education, peers, past experiences, etc. Emotional work *is* gendered; we (men and women) all “do” emotional labor; yet it is important to understand the particular emotional labor that women experience when it comes to their sexuality because of the specific ways in which their sexual subjectivity is regulated, shaped, and maintained by dominant social discourses, such as the binary good girl vs. bad girl discourse. The thoughtfulness of women’s emotional work is not to be ignored; it instead should be brought to the forefront of sexual work and how we understand and shape sexual education initiatives, programming, and resources for both women and men. Further investigation of the three components of emotional work will help in exposing and engaging with the idea that women’s sexual decision-making can be both thoughtful and complex.

## **The Power of Discourse: Looking at the Representation of Emotional Labor**

### **Within Women’s Talk**

In order to explore the negotiation of female sexuality and the emotional labor involved in women’s sexual decision-making, I examined college women’s talk and how they negotiated powerful sexual discourses, how they talked about sex (the act), the discourses that shaped their talk, and the emotional work that their talk represented in their lives. Since young women internalize cultural and social discourses, emotional labor consists of the work that women do in

negotiating their sexual decision-making amidst these discourses (Diamond, 2008; Fine & McClelland, 2006).

Wheeldon (1987) argues that discourses are “elements of relations of power” that take specific forms in particular societies and are organized through categories such as race, gender, religion, and age. Socially constructed discourses—“representations, ideas, narratives, social norms and practices from the dominant categories of knowledge”—limit and regulate how women make meaning of their sexuality and create a framework for their sexual decision-making (Ashcraft, 2003, p. 43). Therefore, social discourses establish norms and meanings that inform women about how to be sexual, why to have sex, with whom to have sex, and what it means to follow the socially “appropriate” sequence of sexual activities, such as having sex after one is in a committed relationship (Diamond, 2008; Ward, 1994). Young women come to understand how these discourses operate via the education they receive before—and during—college and through the value and belief systems of their family and peers. Discourses have a powerful influence in how they determine women’s sexual subjectivities. In the literature review I further expand upon the social discourses that I utilize within this study.

### **Problematizing the Nuances of Sexual Desire**

How I talk about sexual desire throughout this study is intertwined with how I talk about sexual agency, the ability that women have to make choices and the influences upon their behaviors while they use their knowledge and experiences to make sexual decisions. How is college women’s sexual desire and subjectivity shaped within a culture that privileges a heterosexist male culture, and what emotional work must women do in order to identify their

desire within that context? I am not talking about sexual agency as if it is something that is pure or total; I instead complicate it as something that is always in tension with social structure and discourse. Sexual desire therefore emerges from how women wish to exercise their sexual agency based upon what they understand to be their choices and desires. Although I interviewed women whose level of sexual experience varied (virgins, woman who had had only one or two sexual partners, or women who had had a number of sexual partners), each woman exhibited some level of sexual desire, and with that, a certain level of negotiation and emotional work.

Why is talking about sexual desire significant to this study? If I wish to consider what it means to affirm female sexuality and to shift educational programming efforts accordingly, it is important to first consider the regulations and complications of female desire. As Friedman and Valenti (2008) argued in their collection of nonfiction short stories on female sexual power and eradicating rape culture, we must first “emphasize a pleasure-affirming vision of female sexuality, wherein saying yes and no are equally valid moral decisions in many sexual contexts, and wherein women not only are answering the question, but also feel equally entitled to ask for and initiate sex when they want it and their partner agrees” (p. 27). By problematizing women’s sexual desire, this study will be able to get at the heart of how desire is shaped by outside influences and to identify what educational “gaps” in sexual education curriculum, for example, need to be covered.

### **Why Study College Women?**

Sexual practice among young people continues to be a significant topic in the field of higher education. Most of the current research on college students and sexuality focuses on



hooking up or engaging in “casual sex” (that is, sex outside of a committed relationship), sexual risk taking under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, and the disappearance of the “traditional” dating scene (Bogle, 2008; Freitas, 2008; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000).

Situating my study within a college context is significant because sex in college is framed as something that is “free” and “without constraint or thought”; it is not a place that has been presented as a site that involves thoughtful decision-making and management of sexual desire. With that said, current research fails to examine sexual practices outside of a negative, or “risk-taking,” context, such as sex that happens within *committed* relationships and the existence of female sexual desire. Moreover, female college students are of particular interest to me because, when they confront specific challenges when they go to college, such as hostility from peers, intimidation, and having to navigate a setting in which men’s sexuality is privileged and women’s sexuality is demeaned and rendered silent (King, 2011). However, despite these challenges, there are many pockets of space the college experience offers where women can exercise their sexual agency.

College women often find themselves negotiating their sexuality in the context of institutional practices, sexual health programming, and campus social life, all reflecting the sexual discourses present on college campuses (Bogle, 2008; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). For example, human sexuality courses on many college campuses focus on the biological and physiological aspects of sexuality “rather than cultural, social, psychological or political issues,” where discussion of women’s sexuality and desire is often missing and/or placed on the periphery of the curriculum (White, 2006, p. 205). Although it is made clear that sexual activity

does exist on college campuses, current research has yet to address issues of women's negotiation of their sexuality and the emotional labor that goes into such a complex process. My hope is that my study will provide a different perspective on how people read and understand how women make sexual decisions; and that women's decision-making is a thoughtful and contested process that is constantly in tension with dominant socially ideological discourses.

College campuses across the country are diligent in making information available to students regarding how to protect themselves from STDs and pregnancy and to avoid acts of sexual violence (Bogle, 2008; Patterson, 2008). Yet, research finds that much of this information is primarily focused on sexual risk-taking and how the use of alcohol and other drugs fuels unwanted sexual advances (Downing-Matibag, & Geisinger, 2009; Kimble, Neacsu, Flack, & Horner, 2008; Littleton, Tabernik, Canales, & Backstrom, 2009). Colleges' messages are therefore geared towards women because of their role as sexual gatekeepers (Fine & McClelland, 2006). In my current position as a student affairs administrator who is also responsible for educating students on these issues, I have found myself seeking out various program models that move away from these discourses and instead educate more inclusively on the issues of sexuality for *all* students. Thus, for my study I naturally gravitated toward the experiences of college students, and in particular, college women. I became specifically interested in how women in college think and talk about sex and how they work to build sexual subjectivity on a college campus.

Before my pilot study, I thought the necessary components to sexual education were educating both men and women on maintaining healthy sexual relationships. Yet, the pilot study

data raised some questions for me. What *do* college women consider to be the components of a pleasurable sexual relationship? How do women negotiate the educational programming messages they receive in college? How does this inform their sexual desire? How do women's past experiences inform their sexual decisions in college? What is the emotional work some women do when making sexual decisions so that those decisions are considered as "appropriate" and acceptable to others? How do discourses on female sexuality inform how women police themselves and police each other? Do acts of "policing" vary among college women? At the three colleges where I conducted my study these women had expectations that they were to be sexual and/or they expected to have sex because of the social expectations of college life, or because of an agenda set by popular culture, the media, and other social institutions. Yet women still worked to negotiate their sexuality on campus despite these assumptions because they were still held to society's overall expectation of being a good girl or a sexual gatekeeper.

In regard to women requiring justification from others for their sexual behaviors and thoughts, I found that participants sought their friends' approval of their sexual behavior. For example, Eva revealed that she felt so judged and excluded by her peers because of her experience during freshman year that she considered transferring schools. However, Eva later revealed that she framed her sexual pleasure within a context that she finds is more "acceptable," not just among her friends, but among society as a whole. That is, Eva allowed herself to be sexual, as long as she "really cared about a person" and her sexual activity was part of an emotionally committed relationship. What does a shift in women's sexual decision-making mean for women when it comes to defining their own sexual desire? What does it mean for their

subjectivity and how their identity fits in (or does not) with their current experience as a college student? In other words, will all female college students become Evas or suffer severe social consequences?

I explore how women understood and negotiated what it means to be sexual gatekeepers within a dominant framework that privileges men's sexual desire; how sexual decision-making differed among nondominant populations, such as lesbian and bisexual women and women of color; and how women's narratives about their sexual experiences engaged with their agency. Analyzing the sexual discourse that women used with each other will enable me to investigate how women's sexual experiences were regulated *for* them and *by* others in society. Ultimately, the context of my study focuses on women's emotional work and their negotiation and resistance of particular regulations that exist within a socially dominant framework.

Since my pilot study included participants, such as Eva, who were primarily white and identified as straight, my intention was to explore the reality of experiences inside *and* outside a white, middle-class, and heterosexist context, so as not to imply that experiences like Eva's are generalizable to all women, such as women of different classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, and sexual identities. By paying attention as researchers to our participants' subjectivity, we recognize the identities that people bring with them and how those identities influence how they interact with the world, what they say, and how they say it (or do not say it).

A culturally representative study is important because current research on college students and sex suggests that there is only *one* college experience and that that experience is white, middle-class, and straight (White, 2006). Such studies do not recognize experiences

outside this dominant context that include additional complexities such as race, sexual orientation, family, and social class background (Diamond, 2008; Ward and Taylor, 1994; White, 2006). For example, some studies focus on alcohol use at “theme parties” on campus, with titles such as “jocks and ho’s party” or “millionaires and mistresses party,” hosted by fraternities and sororities—parties attended primarily by white and straight students (Freitas, 2008; Kimble, et al., 2008). These studies marginalize the experiences of women outside of the “Greek Life,” white, and heterosexist context. Educators would do well to understand the contested area of women’s sexual decision-making in order to improve and expand upon curriculum, shape decisions on curricula, and also expand upon and offer more intentional programming, not just in college, but also at the middle and high school level.

The lack of research that exists on the sexual desires of a more representative sample of college women (in addition to the middle-class, white, straight experience) with a spectrum of experiences (e.g., committed relationship vs. casual) motivated me to explore the emotional work of college women and how they negotiated their sexuality on a college campus. Existing research on college students often views them via a developmental lens; I wanted to shift away from a theory of development and place an emphasis more on how women negotiate what is already complicated. I believe that women’s sexual experiences are not meant to be categorized and seen in developmental shifts, but rather viewed in dimensions of particular influences (e.g., parents, ethnic background, peers, and partners) that shake up what is already ordered by dominant societal institutions and instead expose women as active sexual subjects. I am not trying to argue that women grow developmentally to an “appropriate stage” of sexual decision-making. Instead I

showcase how they are already dealing with complex work. The next two chapters will provide background on the literature that grounds my research and also explore the methodological choices I made for this study.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Five bodies of knowledge inform my study: (a) emotional labor within the female experience and its impact upon the negotiation of female sexual desire, (b) the significance of sexual subjectivity and agency within the discussion of female sexuality, (c) existing social discourses on female sexuality and how those discourses become embedded within our social institutions, (d) the influence of family on sexual decision-making, and (e) the sociohistorically constructed expectations of a college experience and its implications for female sexuality.

### **Emotional Labor Within the Female Experience**

A number of resources helped me define emotional labor and understand how the concept could be useful for this study. For example, Arlie Hochschild (1983) defines emotional labor as the use and suppression of emotions in order to fit organizational and social norms. For this study, I was particularly interested in the stories that *all* women tell about their sexuality and the emotional work that was involved within their sexual decision-making. How did women distinguish their feelings about their sexual decisions from how others (e.g., parents, friends, and partners) feel about their decisions? How did the role of sexual discourse regulate their work? I drew upon Arlie Hochschild's (1983) and Megan Boler's (1999) work to support the definition of emotional labor within my study. Although the two women vary in their theories of emotional "labor," both helped me form an idea of how this sort of labor operates within young women's sexual decision-making.

Feminist theorists argue that dominant discourses work to regulate women in a variety of ways. When talking about subjectivity and discourse, I utilize the framework of feminist

poststructuralism; subjectivity refers to the thoughts and emotions of the individual, the individual's sense of self, and their ways of understanding their relation to the world (Wheedon, 1987). How women come to understand the world around them is viewed through an ideological lens; the dominant group (white, male, Christian, straight, upper-class) constructs meanings and images for women, which limit their space to resist societal discourses and negotiate their sexual subjectivity. Feminist poststructuralism argues that forms of subjectivity are historically produced and change with shifts in the wide spectrum of discursive fields that establish them (Wheedon, 1987). For example, Fine (1988) argues that "public discourses of adolescent sexuality are represented forcefully by government officials, New Right spokespersons, educators, 'the public,' feminists, and health care professionals," and are constantly in flux as society changes the discursive meanings attached to a larger dominant social context (p. 29). Within the larger dominant society, women's emotions are seen as "irrational," nonvaluable, and not taken seriously, and are therefore made invisible to the larger society. How women react to how others view their sexual decisions prompts women to further "police" their emotions, desires, and sexual decisions so as to uphold the dominant discourses of female sexuality (Hochschild, 1975, 1983; Tracy, 2005). However, as Wheedon argues, discourses can change or women can negotiate these discourses rather than just continue to reproduce them; the negotiation of and resistance to discourse is how I understand and explain women's emotional work.

Hochschild (1983), in her study on the work of flight attendants and bill collectors, analyzes the concept of emotional labor and how it works within an "invisible emotional system



(i.e., emotional work, social feeling rules) and the private and corporate management of feeling. She studied airline attendants to further understand how gender correlates with job expectations. Based on that study she argues that the corporatization and management of feeling influenced women's emotional work in that they worked to please *others* rather than themselves in order to maintain social norms. Hochschild (1983) was the first to introduce the term "emotional labor," defined as the "management of feelings to create a publicly observable behavior and bodily display" (p. 7). She argues that airline attendants' friendliness to passengers, such as smiling at them and supporting them, is a form of labor rather than "just" an expression of one's feelings, particularly when the airline attendants do not feel the desire to be friendly.

Therefore, Hochschild's (1983) theory of emotion involves the role that social context (jobs, family, religion, gender expectations, etc.) plays in the management of emotions and how labor service workers perform emotional labor to suppress their feelings for the purpose of pleasing their customers and upholding the economy (i.e., satisfaction of customers correlates with increase in sales). She argues that the concept of emotional labor is an invisible emotional system that privately manages workers' feelings for the good of the organization as well as upholding overall academic standards. Emotional labor, according to Hochschild, is a prescribed display of feeling and a way of understanding how employees package emotion.

What happens when the economic component is removed? In my study, I draw from Hochschild's theory not to explore the management of feeling within *an occupation*, but to interrogate the management of *sexual desire* as a feeling and how this feeling is significant to women's sexual subjectivity and how their emotional work is significant to upholding the morals

of society. Emotional labor is significant in other contexts as well, such as college and the pressures on women to define themselves as women and understand their sexuality. In my study, I look at how the management of desire, identity, and sexual decisions shaped women's sexual subjectivity and how they managed sexual desire in accordance with discursive rules and influences from others such as families, friends, and partners. Why is it important for women to uphold social morale? I interrogate their work in this study to provide answers to this question.

Others have used Hochschild's work to explore the concept of emotional labor and how the management of feeling—and desire—causes a negotiation and uncertainty over *actual* feelings vs. *management* of feelings. For example, Pervez's (2006) study looked at the emotional labor of pleasure in how women view pornography. Parvez (2006) argues that women performed emotional labor when trying to separate their private feelings (arousal) from what they *believed* that they should demonstrate (in reaction to the desire that actresses portray in pornography films). On the other hand, Elizabeth Hoffman (2007) investigated the dynamics of the interview process and the power shifts that occurred between the interviewer and the interviewee (2007). She states that emotional labor occurs, for example, when interviewees try to shape their answers based on what they *feel* the interviewer wants to hear. Much of the literature on emotional labor focuses on workers' emotional labor for client, consumer, or subordinate; however, my study further expands upon this definition and explores the management of desire through women's negotiation of sexuality. Furthermore, this dissertation looks at how emotional labor is used as a vehicle for representing gender and sexual identity in particular ways.

In her book *Feeling Power*, Megan Boler (1999), a poststructural theorist, examines the power relations of education and its discursive role in shaping the “social control” of emotions. Boler’s argument helped me to analyze college as a site of social control, as well as a site for negotiation and resistance—a place where women already enter with a set of disciplined ideas about their sexuality, and how their emotions should be shaped and expressed. Within this book, Boler (1999) engages with how gendered roles and expectations are contested and caught up within the management of emotions. Her discussion of “disciplined” emotions, how emotions shape the idea of an “impulsive” individual, and the educational training and taming of youth helped to shape the foundation of my argument. How does emotional work and social control shape talk and one’s sexual subjectivity? How does it fit into society’s regulation of female sexual desire?

Boler (1999) believes that emotions are a site of social control and that “education as a social institution serves the interests of society and functions to maintain the status quo and social order” (p. xvii). She argues that dominant discourses of emotion regulate how people act, and react, within social situations, and that people are taught to internalize guilt and shame based on how we come to understand and internalize our emotions. Therefore, emotional work becomes internalized for women in particular as public and private divisions, “mapped onto gendered roles and emotional rules, requires in turn that women internalize ideologies and ‘enact’ their inferiority on a daily basis” (Boler, 1999, p. 7). As a result, these gendered rules shape women’s emotions attached to decisions and daily life (including emotions such as guilt and shame) that they then attach to their sexual decisions. For example, female emotions could

include feeling ashamed after having a first sexual experience, feeling guilty about having sex on the first date, or feeling sad after a sexually intimate relationship ends. All these emotions represent a particular way in which women engage with social discourses that shape their sexuality.

Boler (1999) argues that the maintenance of social control had traditionally been the responsibility of educational institutions, and that discourses of emotion are most consistently visible in relation to women due to their traditional roles as mother, nurturer, and schoolteacher. Therefore, women are “the repository of emotion in Western culture” and are assigned the role of educating moral citizens and being gatekeepers for decisions and behaviors that are considered irrational (Boler, 1999, p. 31). I find that this concept is helpful to me when understanding how sexual gatekeeping, a task that is socially assigned to women, works to prevent sexual behavior that goes against the hegemonic order of social control, such as having sex outside a committed relationship or being a lesbian. The assignment of sexual gatekeeper, maintaining society’s morals, affects how women think about their sexual decisions. The responsibility rests upon women’s shoulders to affirm the ideological reality of “good girls” who need to—and work to—uphold the defined morality of the dominant society.

### **Discourses on Female Sexuality**

Discourses are powerful ideological representations that establish dominant categories of knowledge; they constrain, and produce, an individual’s actions, behaviors, and decisions by holding individuals accountable to predetermined social roles (Ashcraft, 2003). This dissertation emphasizes social discourses that are gendered and that shape female sexuality and subjectivity.

For example, society continues to establish females as sexual gatekeepers, a role that holds the responsibility of saying “yes” or “no” or “stop” when it comes to making a sexual decision.

According to Diamond (2008), “over the course of history, societies have consistently constrained and controlled female sexuality by restricting not only women’s sexual behaviors but also their thoughts and feelings” (p. 21). Therefore, discourses limit the kinds of solutions or alternatives that are available and imaginable outside a dominant heterosexist and racialized context and make it challenging for individuals to fight their historical and contingent frameworks (Ashcraft, 2003).

During this study, I found that discourses framed particular ways in which family members, partners, teachers and peers police women. For example, there are “moral” or dominant discourses relative to sexuality that inform women what it means to be good girl or a bad girl. Discourses such as this work to “ensure that people will come to regulate themselves policing their sexual desires and actions to be in line with heterosexist norms; they are not neutral. They rest upon and are responses to power relations that stem from institutions like education, legal and medical fields” (Luttrell, 2003, p. 26). Participants’ revealed through their talk that they policed themselves and each other based upon these discourses, always being careful to keep in mind what it means to be a good girl sexually. These discourses complicated their sexual subjectivity, the ability to know and express oneself as a person with desires, rights, and boundaries (Tolman, et al., 2005). The process of confronting and negotiating discourses interrupted womens’ construction of their own subjectivity because of how discourses controlled their sexual identity and decisions through its regulatory standards.

For example, in her 2000 study on adolescent women Lynn Phillips describes what it means to be a good girl using the lens of the “pleasing woman’s discourse.” Her study focuses on the tensions between messages young women receive about their sexuality and their current thoughts and experiences (Tolman, et al., 2005; Phillips, 2000). The “pleasing woman” discourse that Phillips described positions women as holding “proper gender roles,” which assume that women *desire* to have the ability to be pleasant, feminine, and subordinate to men (Phillips, 2000, p. 38). From this perspective, women are not seen as active *subjects* in their own decision-making, relationships, and sexualities; instead, they are expected to act based upon another subject—a man—and tailor their behaviors and appearance accordingly, while ignoring the reality of what it means to be a sexual subject herself. Rather than focusing on the “good” or “bad” choices that women make, feminist theorists “draw attention to social inequalities that shape the range, quality, meaning of and conditions under which choices are made, especially unequal relations of power between men and women” (Luttrell, 2003, p. 29). Keeping this theoretical perspective in mind, I argue that women perform emotional labor to please not only their partners, but also their families, peers, and partners within the larger context of society in order to embody what it means to be a good girl in relation to regulatory dominant standards.

Through the literature review and talking with my participants, I found that the dominant gendered discourses of the good girl vs. bad girl dichotomy shape the ways that parents, partners, schools, and peers understand female sexuality. These discourses include (a) women are to maintain the role as sexual gatekeepers due to their perceived lack of sexual desire; (b) female sexuality needs to be controlled due to “social problems” such as the increasing rate of teenage

pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases/infections; (c) good girls do not have sex unless sex is within the confines of a committed relationship, and bad girls always want to have sex, regardless of a commitment; and (d) females desire an emotional connection above a *sexual* connection (Diamond, 2008; Fine, 1998; Fine & McClelland, 2008; Irvine, 1994; Tannenbaum, 2000; and Tolman, 2002).

These discourses are contradictory and make it nearly impossible to “do good” as women. For example, I found that Eva’s opening quotation is fraught with her recognition of the sexual discourses regarding female sexuality, and that recognition shaped her thinking about her own sexual desire and subjectivity. That is, Eva discovered that in order to maintain the respect of others, she needed to negotiate sexual advances that she received in particular ways; for example, no matter how much she might have desired to engage in sexual activity, she maintained the role of “sexual gatekeeper” in a way that provided a “pass” to have sex as long as it was within a committed relationship. Within this study, I call attention to the variety of powerful discourses, in particular the discourses that shape the binary of good girl and bad girl women managed in order to negotiate—and as a result—shape their sexual subjectivity.

### **The Place of Sexual Subjectivity and Agency Within the Study**

Throughout this study, I frequently return to the concept of sexual subjectivity and its place within participants’ conversations. In order to further understand women’s negotiation of sexuality and their sexual subjectivity, I utilize the term “agency” throughout this study to indicate that women can draw on their own knowledge and experiences to make informed decisions relative to their sexuality in order to negotiate dominant discourses (Raby, 2002).

Furthermore, women have agency through their *understanding* of regulation and how it operates to constrain and limit their sexuality. Women exercise their agency by choosing to engage with and/or resist that discourse; as subjects, women are able to connect to discourse to resist and negotiate expectations of their sexual role in the dominant society and what is produced out of the “clash between subject contradiction and practices” (Wheeldon, 1987, 121). Women continue to build upon and shape sexual subjectivity through the process of emotional labor and the decisions they make.

However, I found that sexual subjectivity for participants was unstable and in flux depending upon their situation and how they were able to talk about sex. For example, women talked about the space for reflection on sexual decision-making as an opportunity to talk openly with each other and think about their sexual decisions critically. Talking was central to the nurturing of their subjectivity, but they described *how* it was nurtured was dependent upon their access to space for reflection as well as on having the support of others. I found that having the opportunity to learn and talk more about who they were sexually—for example, participating in activities and being part of student organizations at college allowed for women to be more open and agentic in their decision-making. However, some women also talked about how the discussion of sex was regulated in their home, which did not provide an adequate space for engaging in open discourse that was free of judgment. Consequently, women’s subjectivity was not something that “increased” or “decreased”; it depended upon women’s locations within spaces that allowed for its nurturing. This study exposes ways in which participants utilized their *agency* from their particular subject positions to negotiate and resist regulatory sexual standards.



I take up a social postconstructionist viewpoint when looking at women's sexual subjectivity and how women become gendered through their absorption of regulatory standards (discourses), and their negotiation and resistance of those discourses. For example, I draw from Chris Wheedon's (1987) work as a poststructural theorist. She argued that subjectivity is a process of understanding negotiation and resistance within our social lives. Wheedon believes that we negotiate and resist from a particular social place or subject position—in this study, the subject positioned as female and sexual within the dominant society. "Individuals develop identities as sexual beings by adopting (or rejecting) particular attitudes and engaging in (and revising) various practices" (Carpenter, 2011, p. 118). Social constructionists argue that sexuality and gender are shaped by social and cultural forces that prescribe particular gender rules that people choose to conform to or negotiate and they adapt their behaviors accordingly (Carpenter, 2011; Diamond, 2008). Exploring women's emotional work negotiating and/or resisting regulatory gendered rules is the crux of my study.

Social norms and expectations constrain women's ability to act autonomously and therefore narrow their "space for action," a phrase used by feminist researchers to refer to the space where women's sexual agency can or cannot be employed (Coy, 2009). Women, in exercising their sexual agency and increasing their space for action and resistance, can move away from self-objectification (a process in which girls and women learn to think about their bodies as the objects of others' desires) and toward a self-*subjectification* where they are able to recognize and celebrate their sexual identities and desires. Understanding women's sexual subjectivity enables one to understand the gendered constraints on how women work at

exercising their sexual agency and the space that they are provided in order to do so. This study focuses on college as the context for negotiation, resistance, and agency.

### **The Early Impact of the Role of “Authorities on Sex” Upon Women’s Sexual Decision-Making**

To understand the current experiences of college women, it is also important to recognize the educational experiences they had *prior* to coming to college and how those experiences were constructed according to social discourses. Women learned early on about social discourses on female sexuality and the power of those who situate themselves as “authorities” over sexuality in their lives, such as parents, educational institutions, peers, and/or partners, and how those authorities can shape their sexual subjectivity. Adults, especially parents, tend to be the first “authority” when it comes to sex. There is a long-standing attitude in society that adults have the primary responsibility of educating youth on what *they* (the adults) think young people should know about sex; whether playing the role of a parent, teacher, or administrator, adults understand that their job in managing youth sexuality is that of protecting youth from harm and not necessarily providing them with services and sufficient information so that they are able to make sexual decisions for themselves (di Mauro & Joffe, 2009). For women especially, this management of sexuality becomes overwhelming and complex to navigate as adults place women into roles of “gatekeepers” and “good girls” allowing them little choice and flexibility for shaping their own sexual subjectivities. For example, research argues that women “having to be a gatekeeper of boy’s [men’s] sexuality and maintaining her reputation” makes it difficult for them to experience or pursue their own desires (Tolman, et al., 2005, p. 9). Furthermore, because

women are positioned by their role to control (and satisfy within the confines of a committed relationship) male sexual desire, the regulation of female sexuality by family members encourages women to manage their own desire in order to respond to adults' fear of youth's sexual urges as "overpowering and difficult to control" (diMaura & Joffe, 2009). Therefore, the power of parents and families as authorities in women's lives becomes a catalyst in how women come to shape and make decisions.

Formalized education introduces another "authority" on sexual decision-making for women. Schools, teachers, and institutional curricula have particular influences on behavior and how youth develop their own line of thinking, decisions, and actions; therefore, they young women become sites of social reproduction and they align their standards with society's (Luttrell, 2003). Sexual education, particularly in the United States, is fragmented because of its struggle to align with socially normative standards; therefore, it is not entirely comprehensive. Access to birth control, information about sexually transmitted diseases, and choices about abortion can be influenced by many things: parental openness, state laws, school regulations, and financial considerations. Access to particular forms of sexual education can vary from school to school and state to state.

Before women enter college, they participate in sexual education programs in elementary and high schools that emphasize the negative consequences of sex and how women should work to protect themselves from the danger of sexual advances; yet, these curricula ignore the need for young women to understand their sexual desires and feelings (Ashcraft, 2003; Fine & McClelland, 2006). Instead, sex education curricula in schools and school-based health clinics

include an “anti-sex” message that does little to enhance construction of sexual responsibility and accountability in young people and sets limitations on their sexual decision-making (Ashcraft, 2003; Fine & McClelland, 2006). “Girls learn from an early age that only ‘slutty’ women want a lot of sex, whereas ‘good’ girls are supposed to serve as gatekeepers for men’s uncontrollable desires,” solidifying the dichotomous discourse of “good girls” and “bad girls” (Diamond, 2008, p. 21). Such messages shape young women’s understanding of their sexuality, which results in young women discounting their own experiences of sexual arousal and ignoring their desires (Diamond, 2008; Fine & McClelland, 2008; Tolman, 2002). Women are provided little space to become agents of their sexuality.

School curricula, by focusing more on consequences than on the realities of pleasure, limit students understanding of sexuality and sexual desire within their lives. Michelle Fine, in her 1988 study on adolescent females and sexuality, found that there were a number of prevailing discourses that exist within public schools that “identify, civilize and contain that which is considered ‘uncontrollable’ [adolescent sexuality]” and regulate sexual activity among young people. These discourses included *sexuality as violence*, *sexuality as victimization*, and *sexuality as individual morality* (Fine, 1988, pp. 32–33). However, the *discourse of desire*, a discourse upon which Fine centered much of her study, is a discourse that she believes is mainly ignored within the public school system and that its absence is “an interruption of the ongoing conversation, and that the naming of desire, pleasure or sexual entitlement, particularly for females, barely exists in the formal agenda of public schooling on sexuality. When spoken, it is tagged with reminders of consequences—emotional, physical, moral, reproductive, financial”

(Fine, 1988, p. 33). Fine believes that if a true *discourse of desire* existed, it would invite adolescents to explore what feels “good and bad, desirable and undesirable, grounded in experiences, needs and limits” and free females from a sexual gatekeeper role, and women would then become subjects of sexuality and initiators as well as negotiators (Fine, 1988, p. 33).

In order to understand female sexuality, educators should understand the powerful discourse and cultural norms that tell young women that a lack of interest in sex is normal and natural (Diamond, 2008). Through the portrayal of young females as sexual victims in sex education curricula (before and during college), Raymond (1994) states that “we may be failing to teach them [women] about genuine sexual autonomy and consequently ensuring that they *will* be victims instead of having women come to experience their sexuality in more positive, and less constrained, ways” (p. 132). At an early age, women seek to understand who their authority on sex might be; therefore, it is important to understand how those authorities shape the education and knowledge that women come to base their sexual decisions upon.

### **Beyond the White, Straight Experience: The Nuances of a Culturally Representative Study**

Research on female college students and sexuality has not accounted for the multiple identities of women and how those identities might intersect with one’s social location and experiences (Jones, 1997). Each student who enters college comes with a history and a multitude of social identities; some students bring with them identities that reflect that particular institution: for example, white and straight for predominantly white institutions (PWI) or black for historically black colleges (HBC). Other students have specific identities (e.g., lesbian, bisexual, students of color, etc.) that may come into conflict with the institution and therefore

bring pressure for personal change and/or a risk of losing a piece of one's self (Stewart & Dottolo, 2005). Tolman (2002) found in her study of adolescent women and sexual desire that, although "sexual violence is prevalent in the lives of all female adolescents, urban girls encountered a constant and pervasive violence" within their experiences (p. 183). The "geographies of desire" that Tolman (2002) define are based upon *where* young women grew up and *how* they grew up and how those locales can have profound effects on their sexuality, making their experiences and negotiations more complex (p. 183). Regulating female sexuality based upon an ideologically dominant experience can present a challenge for *all* women (regardless of race, sexual orientation, or background).

Women of color face additional barriers in negotiating their sexuality because of the regulated and controlling images set *for* them *by* social discourses when they look to express themselves sexually (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Lopez, 2003; Rolon-Dow, 2004). Women of color—primarily black and Latinas—are already seen as bad girls in society; the dichotomy of bad girl vs. good girl does not exist for these women who are already defined by society as "bad." For instance, Nancy Lopez (1993), in her qualitative study on race and gender, found that women of color made sense of who they were and how they understood their life realities "against a backdrop of hegemonic narratives that cast them as sexual objects" (p. 38). Blacks and Latinos, in particular, are portrayed as "dysfunctional, menacing and exotic; the cultural antithesis of Whites" (Lopez, 1993, p. 38). In Lopez's study, women speak about self-policing their sexual desires to escape the stigmatization of their sexuality and to ensure that they fulfill their educational goals as way of debunking those stereotypes (1993). Women of color's sexual

decision-making and negotiation become that much more complex because of the labels that are already constructed for them and the work they have to do in resisting those labels.

Fine and McClelland (2006) argue that because of a long history of reproductive racism in which the innocence of a white child is juxtaposed against the guilt of a black child, broader cultural meanings for women of color become defined as “low-class and over-sexed” compared to the “purity” of white women (Bettie, 2003, p. 62). Based upon a racialized sexual discourse, “dominant and privileged groups define, police and manage the sexuality of anyone who does not fit the model of white, middle-class, straight behavior characterized by the binary and (rigid) masculine and feminine roles” (White, 2006, p. 208). Women of color’s sexuality is eroticized or ignored or presented as non-normative in research studies (McGruder, 2008).

When women of color’s experiences *are* addressed in research, they are often sexualized in sharp contrast to the white experience (Fine 2008; White, 2006). Tolman (2002) argues that “the stereotypical urban girl is assumed to be poor, of color, out of control, at risk and at fault. She embodies the problem of teenage pregnancy . . . she *is* female adolescent sexuality”; she is a “bad girl” (p. 169). For instance, in Nancy Lopez’s 1993 study on young women of color and their identity, Nicole, an 18-year-old West Indian woman of Jamaican ancestry stated:

What I hate is how people view African Americans [in the United States]. It is really hard for me when I’m on the street with my little sister because everybody is looking at me. I don’t want them to think I’m some girl who just went out and sleeps around. So I tell my sister in a loud voice, ‘We’re going to see Mommy now!’ I make it obvious that she is not my daughter.” (p. 32)

Moreover, bell hooks (1992) argues that women of color lose their sexual agency as race and ethnicity become “commodified as resources of pleasure” for those of dominant race, gender, and sexual orientation who wish to affirm their power relations (p. 23). For example, some of the participants of color talked about how white men approached them sexually as if they were an object to conquer, rather than approaching them with a desire to have sex with them as a person, or subject. Therefore, sex with a person of color becomes a representation of freedom to those who are white, resulting in a loss of agency for the person of color who is fixated as an object (hooks, 1992). In other words, hooks (1992) argues that, when white men have sex with a black or Latina woman, they sexually engage with the “Other” only to move back into “their world” feeling more worldly and experienced (p. 23). Positioned as the eroticized “Other,” women of color lose their agency because they are no longer the subject who is experimenting, but rather the object in someone else’s experimentation. How women make sense of an identity that has been eroticized by the larger society is an example of the emotional work they do to shape their sexual subjectivity and see themselves as a viable sexual subject in spite of societal regulatory expectations.

Furthermore, because women of color are eroticized by society and seen as being sexually out of control, sexually alluring, and poster girls for promiscuity and the fulfilling of sexual fantasies, they provide an image for society that “bears the brunt of society’s collective anxiety” about youth’s sexuality (Ashcraft, 2006, p. 330; Tolman, 2002). Society’s views of what constitutes “appropriate” sexual behavior affects, and is affected by, ideological perceptions of race, gender, class, and sexual preference, which exacerbate the complexities of



sexual decision-making for those who do not fall within the “clean” and “good” picture of a white, straight, and middle-class experience (White, 2006, p. 208). As Patricia Hill Collins (1994) urges, in order to re-center the ideas and experiences of women of color in our analyses, we must first identify the differences between what is said about subordinated groups in the dominant discourse and what they may say about themselves. In her work on third-world women and feminism Mohanty (2003) argues that the resistance of others clearly accompanies how those others have been dominated, but acts of resistance are not always recognized in organized movements or activities (p. 82). Rather, resistance and agency is often hidden in participants’ understanding of regulation and domination, their negotiated dialogue and the stories that they had yet to tell. That said, it was important to my research to understand how the sexual subjectivities of women are situated and placed within a dominant framework and how the complexities of their identities were co-constructed by others.

### **Good Girls, Gatekeepers, and Girls Going Wild: Women’s Sexual Positioning**

#### **Within the Media**

Media can shape ways in which women make decisions and can disrupt the shaping of women’s sexual subjectivity. How others’ views are presented through media reports also affirms the discourses on female sexuality. For example, television and films like *Girls Gone Wild* are popular sites for the production of cultural meaning and discourse, particularly regarding the sexual experiences of young people (Eyal & Finnerty, 2009). Although films like *Girls Gone Wild* capture predominantly young, white women being “bad” on film, other kinds of media also position women as sexual objects for the pleasure of a heterosexual male audience.

Hip-hop videos such as Snoop Dog's *Doggystyle*, in which "hip-hop and pornography have partnered to commodify black sexuality in a new genre form and employ black women's bodies as the hard currency of exchange," can diminish women of color's subjectivity (Miller-Young, 2008, p. 263). Commercial rap videos provide hegemonic images of black youth culture and position black women as "bad black girls and video vixens" whose sexual behavior is deemed to be loose and immoral (Richardson, 2007, p. 790). Although white women in *Girls Gone Wild* are labeled as "wild" for exhibiting similar behaviors, both kinds of media have a similar impact on how society makes assumptions about young women's sexuality. Furthermore, these videos are promoted mostly by white corporate-controlled media industries that are patriarchal and sexist (Richardson, 2007). Therefore, social linguists argue for an examination of ways people work to (re)construct, maintain, negotiate, and/or resist identities/situations of language and media forms, as when women refuse certain positioning or, in other words, resist media's messaging (Richardson, 2007). Women can resist the messaging within these videos and films, but not without the work of first deciphering and deconstructing the films' assumptions.

Magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* include articles that inform women how to perform sexually within a white, heterosexist context. Articles titles such as "Blow His Mind Every Single Time" or the "Post-Date Move that Makes Him Want You Even More" or "How to Impress Your Boyfriend's Family" inform women that men's pleasures not only come first in relationships and sex, but also render silent lesbian or bisexual women's pleasures and identities. Other forms of media contradict these articles, causing the concept of sexual authority to become fuzzy and confusing. For example, in journalist Laura Stepp's (2007) book, "UnHooked: How

Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both,” the author explains how she understood and emphasized the importance of college women being sexual gatekeepers. Stepp (2007) argues that young women are delaying love because of the hook-up culture and believes that *women* should be responsible for reinstating traditional sexual discourses and concentrate on finding love instead of having casual sex. What is problematic about Stepp’s arguments is that she not only assumes young women should be focusing on establishing meaningful *straight* relationships in college, but insinuates that women should be largely responsible for pursuing a loving relationship, establishing emotional connections, and allowing men to follow their lead (Friedman, 2007). Because of the social discourses that media like Stepp’s book affirm, women like Eva shifted their sexual desires to match what is more accepted by society as compared to what they may find personally sexually pleasurable.

What the media does not necessarily provide is an accurate picture of the issues women struggle with relative to their sexuality. For example, according to Fine and McClelland (2006), information on young women’s sexual activity in the news media primarily includes statistics based on teen pregnancy rates, the use (or misuse) of contraceptives, the choice to have an abortion or to keep the baby, or how sexual promiscuity has risen among young females. Yet, what the media omits is whether the young woman “enjoyed it, wanted it, or if she was violently coerced . . . little has actually been heard from young woman who desire pleasure or intimacy” (Fine & McClelland, 2006, p. 300). Books like Stepp’s (2007) ignore additional possibilities of women’s sexual experience and leave little room for experiences that are not hetero-normative, for sexual activity *not* involving the use of alcohol, or for sexual experiences that women identify

as being desired and pleasurable. Because women are often seen as bearing the responsibility of saying no, Stepp's 2007 report affirms social discourses on female sexuality by advising women to resist initiation of sexual behavior and control male's perceived "out of control" sexual urges (Ashcraft, 2003; Friedman, 2007; Raby, 2002; Raymond, 1994). Again, women must be able to decipher and negotiate this messaging in order to resist their positioning as good girls, bad girls, and gatekeepers.

### **The Sociohistorically Constructed Expectations of the College Experience**

Within the past two decades, an increase of television, radio, and written media on the topic of sex has addressed how to do it, who to do it with, why you should wait to do it, what's normal, and what's not (Plummer, 1995; Tiefer, 1994). The bedroom doors have been flung wide open, and sex infiltrates not only the media, but our educational institutions and research efforts as well. College, in particular, has been deemed as a site where the topic of sex and sexual exploration has been embraced and even encouraged (Friedman & Leaper, 2010). Therefore, the college experience is a significant backdrop for understanding and studying women's sexuality.

When the "sexual revolution" found its birthplace on college campuses in the late 1960s, students "called for an end to society's condemnation of premarital sexual experimentation" (Bogle, 2008; Moran, 2000, p. 160). Youth sexuality became a social concern as sexual activity among college students increased, particularly among women, and was further sensationalized by the media (Irvine, 2005). Colleges, in response to the sexual revolution, and in order to maintain student enrollment by satisfying needs of the student population, "withdrew their longstanding oversight of student manners and morals and also their authority over the use of

alcohol, drugs, and sexual permissiveness (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990, p. 87). Anthropologist Michael Moffat found in his 1989 study of campus life at Rutgers University, that “sex was at the heart of contemporary college life,” and students had more freedom to be sexually permissive than students had had in earlier generations. Colleges, as a result of a more relaxed social culture, shifted their focus from preventing *all* sexual behavior among students and onto preventing *risky* sexual behavior, such as sexual assault and sexually transmitted diseases (Bogle, 2008). As sexual gatekeepers, college women became the target for such programmatic initiatives.

Over the years, research on college students’ sexual activities has been wide ranging, but today, research on college students and sexuality focuses specifically on a college culture where “hook-ups have become a prominent feature” and traditional-aged college students are students “whose developmental preoccupations with autonomy and sexual interest and experimentation dovetail with such college cultural norms” (Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000, p. 76). “Hook-ups” are defined as sexual interactions between partners who are strangers or slight acquaintances, who rarely continue to build a relationship or even see each other again after a sexual encounter (Bogle, 2008; Downing-Haitbag & Geisinger, 2009; Friedman, 2007). Although media reports on hooking up and dating on college campuses have increased sharply over the past two decades, these reports do not necessarily reveal the details relative to sexuality, sexual desire, and how sexual decisions come about in the first place (Bogle, 2008; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). This is what my study hopes to accomplish.

In response to widespread media reports on college dating rituals, different forms of media draw, and produce, their own conclusions. For example, Catherine Ashcraft (2003) argues

that popular films, where the plots focus specifically on young people and sexuality, create an ideological framework for understanding sexual activity in both young men and women through the films' portrayal of traditional patriarchal, racist, and heterosexist discourses. For example, in the 1998 film *American Pie*, four straight and male high school seniors have made a pact to lose their virginity on prom night. Several themes emerge from this film, including female attitudes about sex and desire. In the film, young women are shown as naïve, innocent, and having more experience in emotions and relationships than sexual knowledge (Ashcraft, 2003). In these films, women are thrust into the sexual gatekeeper role, as they fight to keep from giving "it" [their virginity] away to young men who continuously pursue "it" (Ashcraft, 2003). These films send contradictory messages about the female sexual experience and how the good girl and bad girl images are defined.

The limited research that does exist on college students' sexuality include primarily quantitative studies that often frame college students' sexual practices within the context of alcohol use and abuse, hooking up, and/or risky sexual activities (Bogle, 2008; Downing-Maitbag & Geisinger, 2009, Regnerus & Uecker, 2010). For example, Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker's (2010) work on premarital sex in America, a book that situates adolescent sex as a social problem, position and solidify women as gatekeepers, while arguing that sexual pleasure for women primarily stems from committed relationships. While this argument may partly be true, the authors ignore the fact that the reason why men are the only ones being sexually pleased is because men and women are *only* educated about what male pleasure looks and feels like. Their study ignores the reality of lesbian, gay, and bisexual relationships and the

possibilities of authentic female pleasure while privileging the white, middle-class, and straight college experience, an experience that primarily straight men shape when it comes to sex.

Some researchers argue that college students, particularly white, straight women, use alcohol to decrease their inhibitions when it comes to sexual activity (Gmelch, 1998; Kimble, et. al, 2008; Littleton, et. al, 2009; Morr & Mongeau, 2004; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). This research assumes that women not only are binge drinking more than ever, but that women do so because they believe alcohol is part of campus culture and that it can help reduce stress (Friedman, 2007). Furthermore, researchers argue that binge drinkers are more likely to partake in unplanned and unsafe sexual activities, and women who are heavy drinkers are more likely to become victims of sexual assault (Friedman, 2007; Kimble, et al., 2008). Much of this research addresses concerns about female sexuality and its consequences, affirming women's role as sexual gatekeepers and often dismissing what role their partners may play in decision-making. Furthermore, the research places females in the role of upholding the sexual morals of youth—at the same time blaming them for its downfall—and ignoring the experiences of those who fall outside the dominant framework of a “normal” college student (i.e., white, straight).

Issues such as binge drinking and sexual assault have caused college administrators to further enhance their health services and educational programming. Many campus health services not only provide information on how students can protect themselves, but also provide different methods of birth control as well as STI testing and medical assistance (Bogle, 2008; Kimble, et al., 2008). In addition, student affairs practitioners offer educational workshops that promote healthy sexual relationships as well as educate students on alcohol use and abuse and

preventing sexual assault (Bogle, 2008; Kimble, et al., 2008). However, looking at youth sexuality *only* as a negative experience can be problematic; it not only frames youth sexuality as a social problem, but also classifies students' behavior as irresponsible and enacted without emotional attachment and thoughtful decision-making. Providing these self-fulfilling prophecies for students can defeat their construction of pleasurable identities and decision-making, as they find it challenging to negotiate their sense of self in response to society's expectations (Raby, 2002). Situations that discourage sexual expression, activity, or behavior are rarely seen as problematic, and therefore pleasurable expressions of sexuality go unnoticed and unreported (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Rousso, 1988). My study is different in that it exposes areas in which women have been discounted; instead, it brings, in their own words, their thoughts, feelings, and desires into the conversation and outside of the dominant framework which they are socialized to abide by.

For example, bisexual and lesbian sexual experiences on campus have yet to be studied via a lens of "pleasure" rather than a lens of "danger." Studies by Stepp, Regenerus and Uecker (2007; 2010) discount these experiences entirely in their work. But in studies that do include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth within their scope, researchers do not address experiences that focus on healthy lesbian relationships on campus where sexual behavior is described as pleasurable and desired, and instead concentrate on the hostility LGBT students can experience in college (Diamond, 2008). Homophobia on campus can take many forms such as jokes, open hostility, and physical acts of violence (Evans & Broido, 2002; Gmelch, 1998; Sanlo, 2000). Although many colleges boast supportive—and safe—living and learning



environments, a 2002 study on lesbian and bisexual college women reported that most women experienced “a hostile environment as a result of direct and indirect harassment and lack of support from roommates, resident assistants and other residents” (Evans & Broido, 2002, p. 29). Within this space, lesbian and bisexual women not only must negotiate their sexuality within a heterosexist context, but also explore safe ways to resist these norms and find support from campus resources, faculty, staff, and peers.

The university’s overt monitoring of hostile behavior includes covert efforts to ensure control over sexuality when it comes to policymaking and program structuring for campus life. For example, some colleges have been reluctant to develop a center and/or locale for students that identify as LGBT due to a fear of loss of funding from alumni or because they feel that there are no lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered students at their college (Sanlo, 2000). According to a December 2010 study by the Consortium of Higher Education Professionals, there are approximately 150 LGBT resource centers that currently exist on college campuses nationwide. However, only a small percentage of colleges and universities have such centers (2008). Although it is imperative for educators to understand the reality of what lesbian and bisexual women face on campus and then strategize ways to address hostile and unsafe situations, colleges must also create a space where these women can come to know their sexuality in pleasurable and desired ways. However, in the past three decades, colleges *have* moved forward by incorporating studies of lesbian and gay history, literature, and culture within a specific curriculum, often found within women’s or cultural studies (Gmelch, 1998; White, 2006). These efforts can help support LGBT students on campus and communicate that their sexuality and

overall college experience is important and worthy of noting. Later in this study, I show how participants talked about ways in which these centers shaped their sexual subjectivity.

Megan Boler (1999) argues that emotional rules, like gendered roles, are historically and culturally specific and “shift accordingly to political and economic needs and climate” (p. 43). Women’s sexual decisions are shaped by where the social power is at that particular moment relative to their circumstances. They may be a mother and nurturer or a sexual gatekeeper, or maintaining an active sex life on a college campus while trying to prevent the spread of disease and pregnancy out of wedlock. As a result, programmatic initiatives that primarily target women, such as educating students on STIs, preventing date rape, and maintaining “healthy” sexual relationships, may be presented as a message of “caring,” but in reality stem from the moral panic that surrounds sexuality and, in particular, youth sexuality (Boler, 1999; Herdt, 2009). The university is a complex institutional site for taming youth and maintaining social discourses, while at the same time being perceived as a site to explore sexuality more freely.

Boler’s arguments about how youth become “tamed,” the historical and culturally specific roles that are assigned to both men and women, and the institution of education as the wielder of social control helped me to further frame my argument of how emotional labor came into play via college women’s sexual decision-making. Because of the invisible power of social discourses within our daily lives, women worked to maintain a particular good girl reputation by negotiating their decisions within a structured social order prescribing specific roles relative to their sexuality. Their sexual agency became compromised and the way they expressed their sexual desire became subject to discursive regulations and socially assigned roles. My concern

with women's subjectivity lies within the negotiations and possibilities of resistance that women exercise outside and within these dominant ideologies. The way that women talked about their objectified and *subjectified* experiences helped to expose the multiple ways (inside and outside a dominant and universal ideological experience) they make meaning of their sexuality. The way that women spoke about these experiences impacted the methodological choices I made, which I will explore in the next chapter.

### **CHAPTER 3. METHODS AND PROCEDURES: THE FOCUS GROUP, THE INTERVIEW, AND THE EXPLORATION OF THE THREE SITES OF STUDY**

[It's good] to know that there is someone out there, even it's just for a research project, that thinks about this [sex and women] and cares about it . . . that cares about what we are going through. I definitely think that this talk made me feel like, Okay, I'm not the only one, it's okay, I'm not a freak. Like whenever you think things are bad, they could definitely be worse.

—Megan, 18, straight, white, ULCC

Megan, towards the end of her focus group at ULCC, commented on the usefulness of “this talk” and what it had meant for her not only to be asked about her sexual decisions, but also to hear from others in the group. It had the effect of “normalizing” her decisions in relation to how others think about and make sexual choices. The focus groups provided ample opportunities for women to talk about how they thought about, engaged with, and understood themselves subjectively as sexual beings. Because I was interested in how women talked about sex, the *process* of how they talked about sex and how they specifically mapped their sexual choices and decisions, I decided to collect data from focus groups and in-depth interviews. I conducted focus groups first, based upon my experience with focus groups in my pilot study at Center State University (CSU), and then followed up these focus groups with in-depth interviews. The way that women exchanged information amongst each other in the group resulted not only in rich data, but also positive experiences for the women; they felt the group discussion was “therapeutic” for them. I believed that the participants were comfortable asking each other

questions within the group and also answering each other's questions—questions I did not necessarily think to ask. The conversations in the groups at CSU were insightful and important for the women because, through back and forth discussion among their peers, they understand the complexities of their own sexual decision-making. In this chapter I will talk about the methods I used, and then outline my procedures.

### **Methods**

I understood that my participants' responses were influenced by the social context: the person conducting the interview, the participants' class, race, and ethnic background, sexual orientation, etc. For example, in one of the focus groups at Upper Lake Community College, three of the participants were suitemates, sharing the same residence hall space at the school. Two out of the three participants were quite outspoken in the group; the other I noticed was quieter, and when she did speak, I observed her glancing at her suitemates for validation, or maybe encouragement, as she responded to my questions. For that reason, I chose the latter suitemate to follow up with in a one-on-one interview in order to pull out more information without outside influence. In contrast, women of color participants at Northeast University talked openly with each other, as if they were hanging out in someone's bedroom rather than a conference room in the university's student center. Because they were able to relate to each other's cultural and racialized experiences so well, it seemed to me as if the participants almost forgot I was there; they got caught up in lengthy discussions on how black and Latina women are hypersexualized in society, how their particular body parts are stigmatized (e.g., lips and "booty") or what "turned them on" sexually. These focus group discussions presented a bigger

picture to me of how women talk *to* each other, and how they validate their peers by *how* they talk in groups and talk *about* each other. Looking at the social fabric of people's lives and the multiple ways in which race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect within that fabric brings a nuanced understanding of lived experience and enriches one's study (Belle, 1994; Irvine, 1994). Interviews and focus groups indeed work to "elicit stories and in-depth explanations of people's thoughts and experiences," prompted by the researcher's questions (Hollander, 2004, p. 607).

Researchers argue that the focus group provides the opportunity to capture the dynamics of group interaction and to analyze participants' talk to further understand a topic (Hyde, Howlett, Brady & Drennan, 2005; Warr, 2005). "Sociable interactions that take place [in a focus group] are a blend of private and public accounts . . . as participants shift between describing personal experiences and engaging in broader discussions that reference local and generalized social and cultural contexts" (Warr, 2005, p. 222). Although the conversations that took place among the women in the focus groups were public, they included stories that, within a larger context, would have been labeled private or intimate. The focus groups enabled me to observe the social construction of meaning making, and to explore taken-for-granted cultural assumptions within women's talk (Hollander, 2004; Sieg, 2008; Warr, 2005), a concept that I explore later within the data chapters.

I chose the interview as a method because it can bring out women's perspectives, and it can "combine two separate often conflicting perspectives, a perspective framed in concepts and values that reflect men's dominant position in the culture, and another perspective informed by the more immediate realities of a woman's personal experience" (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 11).

In a one-on-one interview, a participant may reveal a perspective or experience that she was not comfortable in revealing in the focus group. Also in an interview, I had the opportunity to probe further into a participant's experience that I was particularly interested in hearing more about, but was not able to get at within the focus group. For example, I interviewed Carla, a 21-year-old, straight white woman from CSU because I thought that she was one of the most vocal women in the focus group, talking about her supportive childhood, her comfort level with talking about sex with her parents, and her pregnancy during her sophomore year at college. Throughout the interview, I was not only able to hear Carla's take on her pregnancy, but also how this experience aided in the shaping of her sexual subjectivity and how her understanding shifted throughout her experience and after the birth of her child. Furthermore, I was able to follow up with her on questions that I was not able to ask her during the focus group, such as how much support she received from her parents during her pregnancy, how she came to make her decisions, and ultimately what specific work she undertook to make the decision about adoption.

Within the interview and focus group, talk is still governed by outside social forces and particular hierarchies of power that work to limit sexuality to what is "normal" and privatized by dominant ideological standards (Plummer, 1995). For example, focus group data can be criticized as unreliable because interactions of others within the group tend to be oriented toward persuading the group of their *preferred* experience rather than expressing factual information; however, witnessing the dynamics of social interaction can help us understand how others' make meaning of their sexuality (Warr, 2005). Taking multiple experiences into account will enable an

expansion beyond what has already been taken for granted relative to women's sexual experiences.

### **Qualitative Methods and Their Significance in Studying Daily Life**

Researchers prefer using qualitative methods and fieldwork to study the “everyday” of people's lives by participating in the subjects' world and attempting to learn from their participants via their shared experiences in an interview setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Furthermore, investigating the everyday is a continuously changing process “for making the unfamiliar, familiar; for getting accustomed to the disruption of custom; for struggling to incorporate the new; for adjusting to different ways of living” (Highmore, 2002, p. 2). For example, the private world of sex is made familiar when it is investigated as an “everyday” occurrence; it is a topic that can be understood and engaged with in multiple ways. Differences in everyday life that concern class, gender, race, and sexuality will also be understood in different ways when it comes to analyzing the everyday experience (Highmore, 2002; Rose, 2003).

Employing the theory of social construction is helpful when thinking about the ways researchers hear about and learn from others' experiences, as experiences are constructed through interactions among others (Irvine, 1995; Ellis, Kiesinger & Tillman-Healy, 1997; Hollander, 2004). The interview and the focus group are both strategies that work to “elicit stories and in-depth explanations of people's thoughts and experiences,” prompted by questions asked by the researcher (Hollander, 2004, 607). The focus group in particular is used to observe the social construction of meaning making and to explore taken-for-granted cultural assumptions



within people's talk (Hollander, 2004; Warr, 2005; Sieg, 2008). Although the interview and focus group methods may bring its share of problems when studying sensitive issues, like sex, some researchers argue that it is an appropriate method of choice as it brings the opportunity to capture the dynamics of group interaction and analyze participants' talk to further understand a topic (Hyde, Howlett, Brady & Drennan, 2005; Warr, 2005; Hyde, et.al, 2005).

### **Sexual Storytelling**

Sexual storytelling is a political process and one that is governed in particular ways within the larger dominant society. Anthropologist Ken Plummer questions why people have opted to share their sexual stories in public—stories that are traditionally meant to remain within private contexts (1995). How do people choose their language and articulate their concerns when talking about their sexual experiences? What do they leave out and what choices do they make when describing their experiences to others? Plummer argues that our stories are regulated by dominant ideological discourses that govern what gets told (and what does not) by *and* to others (1995). It is often up to the researcher investigating human experiences to elicit the untold stories in order to obtain a fuller understanding of sexual lives and experiences. Often what is said in group discussions reveals how participants understand their experience and societal normative rules *through* their efforts to persuade the group (Hyde, et al., 2005; Warr, 2005). Making known multiple sexual experiences and perspectives breaks the accustomed silence and challenges dominant ideologies (Kulick, 1995; Scott, 1992).

How researchers analyze and explain sexual storytelling is also a regulated space as they bring their own experiences and biases into the process, further complicating it. For example, the

private world of sex is made familiar when it becomes something that is investigated as an “everyday” occurrence, a topic that holds multiple ways of understanding, thinking about and engaging with sexuality. An analytical focus on sex in the field threatens “to parade our most intimate details before the critical noses of our peers,” and how we understand ourselves sexually can impact how we think about how we study the sexuality of others (Kulick, 1995, p. 257).

For example, I am a white, straight woman who was raised as a Roman Catholic. Although I am sexually active and not married, there are certain guidelines that I have created for myself in order to guide my sexual decisions (e.g., when to first have sex with a partner). My decisions have been influenced by a variety of forces, including partners, family, friends, and education. In college, I was surrounded by many friends who were still virgins; therefore, in our own way we “policed” each other. Who was going to be the first one to lose her virginity? And when she did, was it going to be worth the wait? Why was it important to wait and why was it “wrong” not to? For me, such decisions became more complex after I left college and found employment. The limitations I set for myself became more lenient because it is more “socially acceptable,” to peers, family members, and partners, to have sex when one is older and financially secure. These acceptable rules make decisions complex because of how they continuously become rewritten by fluctuating societal discourse and expectations.

In addition, at times throughout my research, I found it difficult to stay in my facilitator role. As I listened to my participants, I found a piece of my own personal past in all of their stories and yearned to share my stories with them. But, I also thought about the importance of not allowing *my* past experiences to cloud how I write about *these women’s* experiences. There

were also times when I wanted to move into a “counselor” role by offering words of advice or consolation when women were talking about a topic that was emotionally charged for them or that resonated with my own past troubled experiences. I found myself wanting to connect with them and offer supportive words, such as, “It will all work out” or “I know how you feel.” But if I had shared, or commented on their experiences, would I have revealed too much? Would I reveal anything of myself that would impact their experience in the focus group? Sharing on my part would only have drawn the spotlight away from them and towards me, the researcher. Furthermore, it would have given them my perspective, would not have reflected their own background.

Yet, what ended up happening was that women supported each other, whether it was through encouraging words or a touch on the arm or an expression of shared outrage. In some cases such behavior might have been due to the fact that some of them knew each other and/or had interacted with each other prior to the focus group. Regardless, as a researcher I needed to analyze a multitude of sexual experiences and be continually aware of the vantage point from which I analyzed them.

### **The Focus Groups**

Prior to beginning this research, I had some reservations about how women participants might respond to my questions, or for that matter, how I would get these women to volunteer to talk about sex in the first place. Would they share their personal experiences with a perfect stranger? Would they share with others—most likely also strangers—in the room? How would women of color relate to a white researcher? How could I effectively build rapport with women

in the short time I had with them? How would my rapport or lack thereof affect my data? The women in my pilot study were already known to me through my student affairs work at Center State University; they were comfortable with me and I had already had the opportunity of building rapport with them through different leadership roles they had held on campus. As a result, I found that most of the CSU students were eager to open up to me and to each other. However, after my pilot study, I was entering uncharted waters. I was anxious.

I needed to consider my vantage point, and in particular, my professional experience. I have had close to 15 years of experience working with college students through my work in college administration. Through my graduate work in higher education administration and my current position as assistant dean of Student Life, I have facilitated focus groups and conducted personal interviews with college students on topics ranging from sexual health to alcohol use and abuse and residential community living. In addition, I have worked collaboratively with campuses' sexual assault/rape crisis centers on issues of healthy sexuality in order to better provide educational programming to college students. Women of various racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds have visited my office(s) frequently to "catch up" or to talk to me about a personal issue they were experiencing; these women often commented on how comfortable they felt in doing so. Although I am not a certified counselor, I am knowledgeable about where to refer young women relative to their emotional, mental, and physical needs. Despite my anxiety, I was confident that my professional background in working with young women and my expertise in connecting on a personal level with college students would be most helpful in collecting rich data for this study.

Indeed, I was able draw on my experience working in student affairs, and my love for working with students, to “break the ice.” A simple smile, a shake of a hand, making the space (classroom, office suite, residence hall lounge) comfortable for my participants, and showing my gratitude for their participation—all of these things went into building rapport with these women. I knew how to talk to college students—how to read their anxiety, their enthusiasm, and their frustrations, and how to effectively funnel those feelings into open dialogue. I cannot find the exact words to explain how I was—and still am—able to do this. I believe it comes from years of practice and the recognition that these students have lives beyond the classroom. I believe that providing them the space to talk about something that nobody ever asks them about—sex and their sexuality—may be the simplest entry point into getting students, in this case my participants, to open up and talk.

The purpose of the focus groups was to encourage talk around sexuality. Participants seemed to have an unspoken need to hear from others, to judge and compare themselves against others, and to simply talk out loud to others about sex and sexuality. According to many participants, discussions within groups were therapeutic because they gave women an opportunity to talk in this way. For example, when asked about how it felt to talk about sex, Kristina, a 20-year-old, straight Latina, responded “The emotion I feel is relief when I talk about sex.” To most of these women, no matter how sexually experienced they were at the time, female sexuality was a mystery; for them, figuring out what pleasure is all about happened through personal discovery and exploration, talking to friends and experimenting with partners. Ironically, these women admitted that they had *not* learned about the particulars of female

sexuality in secondary education classrooms. Their construction of female subjectivity was grounded within personal experiences, experimentation, and open spaces for negotiation and resistance.

### **Procedures**

My research was conducted over the course of three academic semesters: the fall 2006 semester for my pilot study at CSU, and over a period of six months that occurred during the 2010 spring and summer semesters at Northeast University and ULCC. I met with participants based on their availability and on my own busy schedule; because I worked full-time, meeting during the day was not always an option. However, my schedule allowed for some afternoon interviews for those participants that could not meet in the evening. For the most part, I met with my participants in the early evening, a time that worked best for them as it was after most classes were done for the day and before club/organization meetings and other events on campus began.

This study involved six focus groups, each of which met twice (12 focus group meetings in total) and eight in-depth follow-up interviews, in addition to two interviews with each of six LGB women (12 in-depth interviews), making a total of 20 in-depth interviews. Overall, I was able to speak with 48 women through focus groups and interviews; out of those 48 women, three women identified themselves as lesbian, three as bisexual, two as asexual, and one as queer. No one identified herself to me as a trans-woman. Two women chose not to identify; however, within focus group discussions, they did speak to their sexual attraction to and relations with other women. In regard to racial makeup, 36 women were white, four identified as black/African American, two as Dominican, three as Puerto-Rican, and one as Latina. There were two women

of Asian descent, one who identified as Korean and the other, as Southeast Asian. Although my intention was to recruit women of traditional college age (18–21), I could not turn away the three women who fell outside this age range and were in their late 20s. In fact, their contributions to these groups helped in the building of rapport among participants, as I found that they were more open in sharing their personal experiences in regard to sexuality. I had each participant choose her own pseudonym prior to the start of focus groups and interviews for confidentiality purposes. (See Appendix A for a full table of participant information.)

I developed the interview protocol based upon the research questions I introduced in Chapter 1. For the one-on-one follow-up interviews, the questions were meant to further engage participants in conversations and explore with individual participants their ideas related to sex, negotiating sex, and sexual desire. Because the interviews were designed for follow-up with selected participants from the focus groups, the questions differed slightly from individual to individual based upon the experiences they had mentioned in the focus groups that I wanted to further explore. (See Appendix B, which guided my inquiry.)

### **Center State University**

At the time of my pilot study at Center State University, I held the position of director of Student Activities at CSU. Therefore, I was able to solicit participants through e-mail distribution lists of student leaders; my e-mail inbox, as a result, filled with more than 30 responses from interested volunteers in less than 24 hours. However, I could not accurately predict or identify whether their willingness to participate was based on having worked with me before and/or whether it was based on the administrative position I held on campus. In fact, one

young woman told me in her e-mail that she would like to participate even though she was not exactly comfortable talking about sex. I reassured her and reiterated that she should not feel in any way that she has to participate in the group, especially in light of her discomfort. In the end, she chose to participate because she wanted to challenge herself to open up more about the issue of sexuality and thought that the focus group would be a great opportunity to do so. Albeit indirect, her response solidified one of the purposes of my study: to create an open space for women to talk about sex and sexuality.

In October and November of 2006, I facilitated two sets of focus groups with 19 women and conducted four one-on-one interviews with women from these groups. All the women identified themselves as Caucasian and came from a range of social classes. The participants ranged from college sophomores to college seniors (ages 19–21). Some knew each other as familiar faces on campus, in class and in residence halls; or as best friends and roommates and/or fellow club officers. The ease with which they were able to fall into conversation on topics of family values and sexual education surprised me. Perhaps because they knew me and knew and recognized each other, the awkward beginning tone of the groups fell quickly away as they moved easily through the conversation, as they laughed and supported each other through eye contact or nodding heads in agreement, or just welcomed hearing themselves say aloud things that they may have only shared with close friends or family members. I found that throughout this pilot study, the participants were engaged and animated in their responses, and they seemed to look forward to both the interviews and the focus groups. Their energy and enthusiasm in “looking forward to the sex talks” was motivating and encouraging to me in my work. I, too,



looked forward to the evenings spent within the student life suite at CSU or at my nearby apartment where I had the opportunity to peek inside the world of these women and their sexual selves.

### **Upper Lake Community College**

At Upper Lake Community College I was able to connect with a residence hall director who provided me with access to weekly floor meetings in order to recruit participants. The women in these residence halls were eager to participate, and I was able to sign up most of my participants at the residence hall floor meetings I attended. I took 10 minutes to talk about the project and passed around a legal pad for them to provide me with their name and e-mail. I was able to get 19 participants after 30 minutes of travelling to three floor meetings in one evening. Following the meetings, I split the 19 women into two groups of 10, in no particular order. Roommates in focus groups provided an interesting dynamic; for example, Anne and Isabelle admitted that they had participated because their other suitemates were also taking part in the study. In fact, one of the groups included more than one pair of suitemates/floormates. Most of the focus group conversations took place in a common room within one of the residence halls. With their permission, one-on-one interviews took place in women's individual residence hall rooms. I found that their residence hall was a good location because it was a site where women found themselves to be most comfortable and at ease. It was also helpful to gain some insight into the spaces where my participants resided.

Women participants from ULCC were predominantly white. Most identified as straight, and they ranged from 18 to 20 years of age, aside from a couple of students who were

“nontraditional,” or over the age of 25. Although quiet at first within the groups, the women did not take much time to become comfortable and open in response to my questions. By the second round of focus groups, women were talking amongst each other, less in an “interview mode” and becoming more comfortable having conversations with each other. They were so comfortable, in fact, that one of the participants brought her camera so that we could take a picture together to “commemorate” the experience. I opted out of being in the picture; however, a few women got together, their arms around each other and smiles wide. Strangers initially, now bonded over a common experience of sharing their private innermost thoughts about sexuality and sexual decisions.

Although most women were eager to sign up to participate initially, I noticed that by the second round of focus groups, at least one participant did not return from each of the groups. Given that it was the start of the semester and students were starting to figure out their scheduling, I could understand this; or perhaps they were not comfortable with the conversation. I did not follow up or probe to find out why they had left the group, not wanting to intrude.

### **Northeast University**

For my study at Northeast University, I made initial contacts with appropriate administrators who helped me recruit participants for the two women of color groups and the interviews with women who identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual. The director of the LGBT Resource Center and the director of the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Affairs at Northeast University both agreed to have me attend student meetings during the fall 2009 semester (meetings specific to their offices’ services), where I was able to explain my project to the

students and invite those who were interested to participate in the study. In addition, the director of Greek Affairs at Northeast University also helped me gain access to women of color through black and Latina sororities, black women leadership groups, etc., for focus groups; I was able to send e-mails to discussion lists over which both of these administrators had “oversight,” in order to reintroduce my project and invite student participants. The offices at Northeast University, as well as at ULCC, were able to connect me with a variety of young women, which helped broaden the representation of women from varying classes, races, and sexual orientations. I was intentional in soliciting participants from specific affinity groups at NU because my pilot study at CSU had involved women that were white and predominantly straight.

Again, I want to draw particular attention to the sexual health-related resources that were available for women at both CSU and NU due to their specialized relationship; CSU is able to share all resources (health center, advocacy center, LGBT resource center, student clubs, and organizations) because of shared services between the two campuses. This sharing established a culture of open space for advocacy, self-reflection, and education. Women were able to access services from the Advocacy Center, focused on programmatic initiatives within the areas of sexual relationship violence services, prevention, and education. The center offered a wide variety of programs and workshops throughout the year focused on healthy relationships and sexual health; participants refer to this center later on within the focus groups and interviews. One of the programs of this center that women referred to is the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program, a peer leadership program that trained NU and CSU students to facilitate conversations with their peers on issues of sexual violence and prevention. Women at these

institutions were also able to get involved in a number of student organizations that focus on peers educating peers on sexual health and advocacy, as well as involving men in the conversation on sexual violence and prevention.

### **LGB Women at Northeast University**

With the help from administrators at Northeast University, I was able to solicit LGB participants for focus groups and interviews through electronic distribution lists, flyers, floor meetings, and student organization meetings. I found that it was a bit more challenging to bring lesbian or bisexual women together into a focus group, as they did not respond to my request as readily as other participants. For example, for the first focus group I tried to hold at the campus LGBT Resource Center, only two women showed up. I had a slow response in getting the second focus group set up, and the same two women showed up for that one, as well. Beatrix, an 18-year-old white lesbian participant, admitted that she felt uncomfortable talking in front of a large group; she suggested, along with Johan, a white 19-year-old lesbian, that perhaps because women were still struggling with the coming out process, they were reluctant to participate in the study.

Taking note of my disappointment, both Beatrix and Johan suggested that it might be better to conduct one-on-one interviews with LGB women for a specific reason; being that it was still a large university, the LGBT community was nonetheless a small one and there was a good chance that a lesbian woman would be in a group with another woman with whom she was having or had had a romantic and/or sexual relationship. Admittedly, I felt foolish to not have thought of this conflict of interest sooner. I followed their advice and, as a result, I was able to

recruit a number of LGB women for one-on-one interviews, most of them conducted in my office suite after hours at CSU. I interviewed each of the women twice in order to obtain rich data and develop rapport with the participants. I found that, although these women had been educated within a hetero-normative framework, there were still commonalities that they shared with their straight female peers such as (a) a desire for an emotional connection within a sexual relationship, (b) struggles negotiating their sexuality around the male gaze, (c) the need to “fill in the holes” of their sexual education, and (d) the need to do emotional work in order to maintain a good girl image and avoid labels associated with promiscuity. The coming out process for these women was a form of emotional labor, because of how these lesbian and bisexual women worked to affirm their identity within a heterosexist dominant framework. They spoke about having to either fit a norm (at times having to deny their identity in front of family members or authority figures) or resist it. The presence of these normative discourses solidified how much there is for women—straight, lesbian, gay, or queer—to negotiate relative to their sexuality and how powerful the forces are that push women towards normative sexualities within a dominant heterosexist context.

As a 36-year-old straight woman, I have had the privilege of becoming comfortable with my sexuality over 36 years, and my sexual identity is socially acceptable within the dominant framework of our society. Therefore, I took for granted that women who identify as lesbian or bisexual would be comfortable enough to attend and participate in a focus group about sex. This was a mistake on my part! I assumed that everyone, despite her sexuality, race, and background, would enjoy talking about sex. However, I learned that it was not very comfortable for some

women to reveal and talk about their sexual identity with others. As a result, I chose to interview LGB women one-on-one, instead of first getting them together within a focus group. This strategy helped me to recruit participants; and it greatly improved my ability to solicit rich data through their talk.

### **Women of Color at Northeast University**

The pilot study at CSU had all white participants. Therefore, I wanted to be intentional about involving women of color within the discussion groups. I first attempted to recruit women of color participants through student organization e-mail lists and flyers placed in club mailboxes. However, after only getting two or three women to respond, I found that the best means of communication with women of color was having the women sign up through a “women of color” listserv that one of my colleagues at NU had already created for programming and networking purposes. I also advertised via the women’s studies e-mail discussion lists at NU, a list I happened to be a part of. I did not post to and/or utilize the lists often, so I knew the women would not have been able to identify me specifically through this vehicle. However, the participant makeup of this list presented a bias: they were already well versed in feminism and sexuality and had become comfortable talking about sex in women studies courses. For example, during interviews some of these women revealed by the way they spoke that they were aware of the connections between theories of sexuality that they had learned in women’s studies courses and their own experiences; and they used current vocabulary with which some of the other women, such as women at CSU or ULCC, would not have been familiar.

Although I did not struggle with recruiting women of color as much as I did LGB women, I found some resistance to my queries at first. “Candy,” a 21-year-old, straight black woman, talked to me later about the slow and/or lack of response of women of color. She explained that because the community of women of color at NU was small, some women were uncomfortable joining the focus group for fear that other women of color they knew would be participants. Again, I did not anticipate this issue. In the data chapters I explore the phenomenon of women “policing” other women in order to create a measuring stick of sorts for sexual decision-making.

Initially, I was anxious to meet with the women of color groups. I am a white woman who not only would be a stranger to these women, but who could not specifically relate to some of their experiences because of my race and ethnic background. Therefore, I was concerned about how open they would be with me, particularly as a group that has been hypersexualized by society and eroticized by men, both white men and men of color. They might be wary about sharing openly and completely with me because they would be afraid that I would judge and further confirm their sexuality as deviant, not “normal,” and something to be eroticized rather than validated. I could not have predicted what ultimately happened; ironically, these were the groups of women that spoke the longest; they treated the focus groups more as open conversations than as a “round robin” process of answering questions, and were the most open relative to detailed accounts of sexual pleasure, desire, and what it meant to be a women of color at a private and predominantly white university. They talked, laughed, cried, and begged for me to meet with them again. When I had recently celebrated a birthday, a past participant, a 20-year-

old Latina, wrote on my “wall” on Facebook, “Happy Birthday to a woman who allowed me to tap deeper into my erotic side and made it okay for me to talk more openly about sex in academic situations.” I could not ask for a better birthday wish! These women thanked me after the groups were done, and even one time, when I had to wrap up a two-and-a-half-hour-long focus group, thinking to myself, I have to be the one to transcribe all of this data, Sonja, a 19-year-old, straight black woman, asked me “What? Where do *you* have to be?” I had laughed and responded, “Well, nowhere, actually.” The women would have talked into the late evening hours if I had continued the focus group discussion.

For the first focus group, I met the women in a meeting room at the Upstate Student Center at the university one late afternoon. There were approximately five women who trickled in one by one. One was Caribbean, one identified as African American, one was Korean (English was not her first language), and the other two identified as Dominican. Four identified as straight, and one identified as lesbian. These participants were talkative and open with each other. They also expressed a range of emotions when speaking about their experiences and telling each other their own stories. Some women went on for about 15 minutes each! I found it challenging to get through all the questions; but the rapport was easy to build. The most difficult thing was to try and catch what everyone was saying when the women spoke over one another. But what a great problem to have! The women fell naturally into treating the focus group like a casual conversation. At times, I forgot that I was doing research and thought it was just another normal Friday night, sitting around eating pizza and talking with girlfriends.



For the second focus group, we gathered for the first time in the meeting room at the Upstate Student Center. Once again, the women started trickling in once we got closer to beginning time. Casey, a 20-year-old, straight black woman, started off the conversation right away talking about her experience with sexual assault and her recent participation in Take Back the Night, an event held in remembrance of victims of sexual and domestic violence. She admitted openly—and before I had the chance to introduce myself—that she had been raped when she was younger; she was talking about how her mom had strangers in and out of the house. I spoke with her a little about the experience before the entire group arrived, but also reminded her to wait until we got the conversation going! I realize that I could have started the tape then, but only she—and perhaps one other young woman—was in the room. Overall, I found it to be a lively group; I did not have to probe or ask many follow-up questions. I got the feeling, based on how they introduced themselves to each other, that it was the first time they had met, so I was surprised by how open they were with each other. I was able to get rich data from these conversations. The women I asked for follow-up interviews were often the ones who, in the focus groups, did not get the opportunity to say as much as they wanted to say.

### **The Process**

I arranged all the focus groups on a “first come, first served” basis. For example, I grouped women according to site and then assigned women to a specified group, based only upon their schedule availability. For women at Northeast University, I was intentional in having two groups of women of color so as to provide representation to the overall study. Therefore, I recruited specifically for women of color for these groups. I was also intentional of recruiting

LGB women for the same reason. This separation was purposeful because of the comfort I believed women might have talking in groups with other women whom share similar experiences or backgrounds. Once my focus groups were organized, I held meetings at agreed-upon on-campus locations with the help of my contacts at both schools. I chose two women from each of the focus group I had conducted for one follow-up, in-depth interview. Again, I interviewed lesbian and bisexual women *twice* in one-on-one interviews as opposed to forming a focus group, a choice I made for reasons explained earlier. I chose focus group participants to interview based on my sense that they had more to add that would enhance the richness and diversity of the data. For example, in my pilot study, I chose women for follow-up interviews who could represent a variety of sexual experiences: there was a woman who identified as bisexual, a woman who became pregnant in college, a woman who had had sex with only one partner, and a woman who admitted to having a number of sexual partners.

My selection for follow-up interviews was not meant to tokenize certain women (e.g., women of color, women who identify as lesbian), but to enhance the data. For example, I chose women who were particularly quiet during the focus group, such as Isabelle, a straight, white 18-year-old from ULCC, because I felt it seemed that she felt some discomfort discussing her sexual activities in front of others, particularly her suitemates; or women like Alex, 22, who was Southeast Asian and identified as gay, whose opinions differed from those of most other focus group members. I conducted interviews with participants so that I could ask more in-depth questions, not only about their sexuality and behaviors, but also about the process of their sexual decision-making. I conducted interviews during the fall semester of 2006, with women from the

focus groups at CSU, and during the 2010 spring and summer academic semesters, with women from the focus groups at ULCC and NU. Interviews took place in an agreed-upon on-campus location (for CSU interviews I used my nearby apartment) that offered optimal privacy (i.e., a door to shut) in order to maintain confidentiality. Focus groups and interviews were transcribed and coded.

Before facilitating these focus groups and interviews, I ensured the confidentiality of participants by having them sign a consent form. On this form, I had participants choose a pseudonym to use during the conversations to ensure confidentiality. At the first meeting of the each focus group, I asked informants to sign a pledge that they would keep the focus group conversations confidential. Afterwards, they were provided a copy of their consent form as well as the pledge.

I worked collaboratively with the health/sexual assault centers at Northeast University's campus and with various offices of Student Life at ULCC so that they were informed of my project. Because of the nature of these conversations with women, I anticipated that some women might disclose experiences with sexual assault, rape, abuse, etc. I do not have the training for this level of counseling, so I needed to be able to refer women participants to appropriate areas on campus for counseling and support. I also directed women to these centers to obtain more information on the resources that they provide women at the university, such as counseling, gynecological resources, and sexually transmitted disease testing. My collaborative work and partnership with the health/sexual assault and LGBT resource centers on campus involved periodic consultations with staff as I moved through the components of my research.

At the beginning of each group, I started out by saying hello and greeting everyone at each focus group (see Appendix C for questions). Also because these women were voluntary participants, they were curious as to what *this* group was all about; what questions did I have to ask them about sex? What would the other women have to say? I talked about my project in the beginning, and then asked a few basic questions before diving into some more specific questions. Initially, I would say, for example, “Tell me about yourself. How would you describe yourself? How would others describe you?” I encouraged women to be open with each other, but provided them an “out” if conversations became uncomfortable. At times, I would offer my own insight or a joke to ease the tension where appropriate. I followed up and pushed participants to further explain by asking, “What do you mean by that?” or “Tell me more about that.” At times, I was able to sit back and let the conversation flow. Sometimes, I had to stop participants in their talk so that they could further clarify for me pieces of their responses or a specific term they mentioned that I was unfamiliar with, and/or to explain to me how they made sense of a particular experience.

I believe that the groups and interviews were therapeutic for the women (and participants also told me as much!); they often came in eager to tell me what was going on in their life or recent experience, or what they were struggling with in a romantic relationship. I believe there was an unspoken desire for more open conversation within the context of focus groups; a continued desire to hear from others and to ask oneself, “Am I normal?” or, in some cases, to use the answer to this question to compare oneself to other women. Finally, the women admitted to me that someone asking them—and giving them “permission”—to talk was not just rare, but

welcome. Simply providing the space and offering the questions had been enough for me to solicit rich data.

Throughout these conversations, I interacted with women face-to-face and asked questions that encouraged detailed conversation and provided me with the kind of detailed narratives that characterize rich data. In addition, at the beginning of each focus group, I introduced my study and reviewed “ground rules” for the focus groups. My focus groups (and my one-on-one interviews with the LGB participants) were structured and guided by the following initial questions: What was your experience in first learning about sex? Describe your sexual education in high school. When were you first introduced to sex education? Who did you talk to about sex? How private/public were these discussions? How do you talk about sex with your friends and family? How do you use social networking—if at all—to talk about sex? When talking about sex, what emotions come into play for you?

As the women engaged in conversations about their sexuality, I recognized that there were elements of emotional and psychological risk involved for the participants. What women chose to disclose within their focus groups depended on the social context of the focus group, what the interviewer chose to disclose about her own experiences, and the nature of the participants’ experiences (e.g., whether they had been emotional and/or traumatic). What participants revealed about their sexual lives may have been “value” laden; or participants may have exaggerated and/or hidden information to make themselves “look good” in front of the researchers and the participants (Hutchinson, Marsiglio & Cohan, 2002). Talking about sex can

be especially problematic for women in how they portray themselves sexually to the larger group as a good girl or a bad girl based upon how they think about their sexual experiences.

### **Analysis**

I approached my analysis inductively by analyzing details and specifics of the data to discover important categories, or ideas that would eventually turn into themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). I read the transcripts of the focus groups and interviews many times and then coded for data and themes. Codes are labels for assigning meaning to chunks of data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). I paid particular attention to how participants made meaning of their sexual lives, activities, and decision-making. I created a list of numerous codes that were read from the data, and then narrowed that list down to more manageable themes. For example, I separated out and categorized recurring themes by how women talked about sex and the influences on their decision-making such as school, friends, parents, and partners. Through thematic analysis, I identified emotional work as the process for women's sexual decision-making and how women navigated family and friends' attitudes and experiences in tension with their sexual subjectivity.

Overall, I read the data as women constructing their subjectivity through the decisions they made and the lessons they learned. But most importantly, in relation to my methodological choices, I found that women constructed these interpretations through listening to others in focus groups. In fact, some admitted (after I asked) that they chose to participate in order to hear what others had to say. I found that asking women about their choice to participate was a good question because it revealed what "gaps" women would like to fill in their knowledge about sex.

If, by answering this question, women thought about why they were attracted to the focus group, they would be better equipped to negotiate and interpret their sexual subjectivity.

### **Limitations of the Researcher Role**

One of the things I learned as a researcher through this experience was how I had to negotiate my role as a researcher and a student life practitioner. Because I had worked with some of these women directly in a number of capacities relative to student activities on campus, I knew CSU participants well; regarding some others, I may have walked past them on campus or worked with them during an activity or event at NU. How would I balance my current position as a student affairs administrator with my role as facilitator of focus groups and interviewer? As mentioned before, I struggled with the urge to counsel these women or to empathize with them through the sharing of my own stories. To be honest, sometimes after I had turned off the recorder, I gave in to these urges mostly because I knew these women personally or because of my past training in student affairs, which prompted me to respond to their concerns and offer advice. However, I realized that I should have kept the recorder on, as the women continued to talk about their experiences. It was awkward for me to know which “hat” to wear and when, as I tried to move back and forth between the two roles. I never fully reconciled them, but I did become more comfortable with sitting back and letting the natural flow of conversation among peers assume the “counselor” role, rather than myself.

When I started my research, I understood that not all of the focus group conversations would be able to fully articulate the experiences of all women relative to race, sexuality, class, educational background, etc. However, my intent was to bring to light as many voices as possible

to help me best frame my argument. No matter the group, women's conversations focused a lot on the negative messages that they had associated with sex and sexual education; through their talk, I noticed that there was a "silencing" around sex and their sexuality, in particular their sexual pleasure and how to achieve it. Most of the women were very detailed in expressing their feelings about sex and sexuality, their curiosity about sex, and their frustration that they did not receive instructions about sex or "how to do it."

Overall, I felt that the conversations within the focus groups and interviews served a reciprocal purpose in that they not only fed my research, but also sparked rich talk—a ripple effect of conversation beyond the closed suite doors and conference spaces—among and between sexual partners, peers, family, and friends. The focus groups and interviews offered space for this sensitive topic to be aired beyond its normally regulated means (i.e., high school classrooms). Seeing this, I felt motivated to continue my research and to continue meeting an apparent need among women for healthy and open discussions about sex. How these women talked amongst each other spoke volumes to me. In the next three chapters I will discuss the data I obtained.



**CHAPTER 4. THE REGULATION OF FEMALE SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITY VIA  
SOCIAL DISCOURSES AND GENDERED SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS; THE  
MAINTENANCE OF THE “GOOD GIRL” IMAGE**

It's how you grow up; they [parents, authority figures] all expect you to get married in white to a man and be a virgin. It's that whole issue that we women are kind of subjected to. We have to be virginal and pure and clean and not touched, left untouched for the man. Then we belong to him eventually. I mean sex isn't even yours anymore; it's like you're his. I totally try to live my life completely opposite; maybe that's why I am who I am now. I think we feel guilty; we don't want our family to judge us and think that we are less than what we are.

—Vicky, 21-year-old Dominican from NU, did not identify a sexual orientation, currently in a relationship with a woman

Vicky is talking about herself as a sexual subject, describing what it means for women to negotiate the social expectations attached to female sexual subjectivity and how those regulations follow a dominant ideological discourse, such as the social expectation of a woman having sex with a man as long as it is within a committed relationship or a woman succumbing to the privileging of male sexual desire (“sex isn't even yours anymore, it's like you're his”). Although Vicky expressed her determination to resist society and parental expectations by living her life “completely opposite,” she also explained the weight of guilt she feels as someone's daughter who is sexually active outside of a socially constructed dominant framework. Vicky also understood what it meant for her to be sexually active with another woman, which means that

she also accepted having her sexuality held underneath a regulatory gaze by society—and her parents—because of her perceived deviations from “the norm.” Because of her refusal of the norm of a straight committed relationship, Vicky is seen by society as “bad” or “wild,” as she does not fit within the binary category of a good girl; furthermore, because of her race, she is also viewed as a bad girl due to the eroticization of women of color in contrast to the ideological notion of the pure, white woman. Therefore, Vicky cannot attain good girl status.

It is not necessarily that girls have “gone wild,” but rather that society has played such a significant role in policing and regulating their behavior. I define regulation in relation to emotional labor by looking at how social institutions and discourse control or direct women’s sexual behavior and decisions according to social normative standards and principles. Women exhibit agency through their emotional work of understanding regulation. Much like deciphering a difficult calculus problem, women must first work through troubling social ideological discourses and regulation by social institutions in order to manage their sexual decisions and behaviors. For example, in order to sustain and maintain the good girl image, women are directed to work through and think about their sexual decisions in particular ways. Socially constructed labels like “slut” and “whore” and “dyke” categorize women as “bad girls”—or “wild girls”—who have sex with multiple partners, deviate from male-female relationships, and/or are women of color who have historically been labeled as “hypersexual” (Lopez, 2003; Tannenbaum, 2000). To be a “good girl,” women are expected to maintain a particular image of femininity, to be “pure” (or read: white, straight), to not “flaunt” their sexuality through dress or behavior, and to only have sex within a committed relationship. Women, like Vicky, who do not meet these

stipulations fall within the bad girl category. In this chapter, I argue that the binary of good girl vs. bad girl is not only limiting but also regulating, as sexuality is complex and varied phenomenon; to place people into “either-or” categories regulates the ways in which they are able to exercise their agency and shape their own sexual subjectivity. Furthermore, I found that participants’ emotional labor was not just about managing their sexual decisions and behavior in relation to the good girl image, but also finding a sexual authority (an individual that possesses particular knowledge about sex and/or is more sexually experienced) that they could seek information from, either an authority already identified for them (teacher, peer, parent) or one they had identified for themselves.

Although in the next two chapters I explore the idea of how women negotiate and resist dominant social standards and how this elicits emotional work, I first discuss how participants talked about their understanding of these discourses and socially defined roles, and how their decisions become complicated by binary roles of good girl and “slut.” How did regulation complicate their sexual pleasure and subjectivity and their negotiation of these regulations? How did emotional labor emerge from the context of their understanding of the regulation?

In this chapter, I argue that all women—straight, gay, white, and/or of color—undertake emotional work to maintain and uphold some part of their identity so as to align with what it means to be a good girl. Women perform the emotional labor of managing their sexuality in order to be consistent with dominant social expectations; therefore, women’s sexual subjectivity is already defined for them *before* they have an opportunity to discover their own sexual identity and pleasures. “Gender inequality and sexual double-standards are potent forces that continue to

shape and influence young women's sexual behaviors, feelings and experiences," whereas society subscribes to these standards and establishes particular rules and boundaries in accordance with what it means to be a "good" and "bad" girl (Tolman, et al., 2005, p. 8). The emotional work I address in this chapter focuses on how women understood and talked about the regulation of their sexuality and how regulation can come in varied forms and from different people, all of whom are informed by the binary images of the good girl and bad girl.

In juxtaposition with the data, I will talk about how the good girl image is imagined by others and viewed by women through the lens of particular influences (partners, families, and friends) who are *also* influenced by social discourses and ideological notions. Terms like "good girl" or "slut" are negotiated labels that are used by different communities of people (e.g., educators, the media, religious doctrine) as a strategy for regulating female sexuality and for defining how well (or poorly) a woman fits into the role prescribed for her (Tannebaum, 2000). Defining women by their sexuality and labeling them "wild" or "good" implies that, like a wild animal, their sexuality should be controlled and regulated. Although today virginity no longer holds the central place in how women's sexuality is defined, a spectrum of new choices, and thereby new regulations, have restricted women from exploring their sexuality in healthy, proactive ways (Lipkin, 2009). This chapter is about how college women talked about ways they were regulated by social expectations of the good girl and bad girl—and how they saw others (e.g., educators, families, and partners) manage their sexuality based upon these images. This chapter is not about criticizing how *people* regulated women or how that regulation was good or

bad, but instead seeks to show how the *regulation* itself influenced decision-making, to demonstrate that the women's sexual subjectivity was complicated and complex.

Accordingly, I look at how college women worked to understand how they are regulated within different contexts. How did emotional labor work within varying spheres of influence and identities for these women? First, I extrapolate the socially normative notions of “good girl” and “bad girl” and how these can have varying meanings for different women. Second, I look at family influence and family members’ understanding of social norms—from the daughter’s perspective—in accordance with how they viewed their daughters as sexual beings or as “good girls.” I explore the nuances of the different kinds of relationships the women participants had with their families and how these relationships influenced and shaped their sexual decision-making. I then talk about the gendered and sexualized education offered within the classroom, and how women’s knowledge of sexual pleasure and decision-making was regulated by the different ways they were formally educated. In the fourth subsection, I look at how women discussed and recognized the privileging of men’s sexual desire, particularly on college campuses, and how the privileging of men’s sexual pleasures silenced all women’s (straight, lesbian, gay, or queer) sexual desires and regulated the ways in which women managed their sexuality. I then explore how women who identified as lesbian and/or bisexual talked about how their identity was shaped by others, particularly males, and how the privileging of male sexuality constructed their sexual identities. The next context regards how women talk about how their sexuality is policed by peers through the use of labels such as “slut” and “whore.” Finally, I look at how women of color talk about their sexual subjectivity and how it has been racialized and

eroticized via social images and institutional norms. I found that when women talked about sexual decision-making, their talk represented more than just sex and sexual desire; it also involved issues such as independence, agency, and anxiety.

### **Bad Girl vs. Good Girl Discourse: The Maintenance of the Good Girl Image**

I argue in this study, but particularly within this chapter, that sex (and sexual decision-making) is complicated and constantly in tension with outside social forces. There are powerful gendered normalizing functions that influence sexuality; therefore, how *everyone* (parents, partners, and peers) looks at others' sexual activities and decisions is influenced by *their* own past and current sexual experiences such as sexual abuse and/or unfaithfulness within the marriage. Emotional work for women involves understanding how they are regulated by others' perceptions of discursive roles and practices and then how women attempt to manage, negotiate, and exercise their independence and sexual agency according to their understanding.

Social norms serve as a basis for our decisions and judgments and how we police and regulate others. Regulating is about controlling or directing someone else's behavior, while policing is an act of talking about or framing one's behavior in accordance to these regulations. For example, how women criticized the way that other women made sexual decisions was a form of policing of the other's behavior. Our actions and how we understand regulation is framed within spheres of powerful social influences and discourse. I found within my data that emotional work from social regulation emerged from women's reactions to and how they understood the binary of the "good girl" and "bad girl" discourse; yet the process became complicated as they tried to align these images with their sexual subjectivity. In my discussions,

I found that women were in tension with wanting to be good girls but also wanting to act upon sexual desires that situated them as bad girls. Women worked to negotiate these conflicted feelings within the context of their sexual pleasure. For example, Nicole, a 21-year-old straight Dominican from NU, talked about her “battle with herself” on making sexual decisions:

I know there are some times—there are many times—that I want to make really bad decisions and say, you know what? I just want to do it [have sex], why not? Like everyone else does it, why can't I do it? But at the end of the day, I think about it, and I'm like, how am going to feel at the end of this? And I always have this constant battle with myself, because I've always been kind of known as that “good girl” in a certain sense. But sometimes I don't want to be categorized as that good girl. There have been certain situations where I'm like, why? Why can't I just do this [have sex]? Why can't I just fight this little voice inside me?

Nicole struggled to maintain a good girl image, yet also worked to figure out how her sexual desire would fit within the prescribed behavioral context of good girls and how she needed to manage her sexuality between the two images. She understood what it meant to be a good girl by not having sex and remaining a virgin, but her work in battling that “little voice inside her” demonstrated her negotiation between falling outside those boundaries and the overall sexual desire that drove her to want to be a bad girl. For Nicole, there were no shades of gray within this binary. Within this dominant ideological framework, women can only be categorized as one or the other.

How women confronted the discursive social expectations of the good girl disrupted the process of the construction of their own sexual subjectivity. For example, Elisa, a white, straight 20-year-old from CSU admitted, “Girls just don’t talk about it [having sex]...like girls aren’t supposed to want to have sex, they’re supposed to be the quiet and subdued ones, and if they’re talking about it, it kind of goes against everything, that’s just how everyone has been brought up.” Elisa’s understanding of what it means to “not talk about sex” corresponds with how she understood social expectations of female sexuality, like not flaunting her sexuality through public discourse. Although Elisa chose to talk about sex with friends she knows, she also worked to make sense of how to talk about sex according to what “good girls” are supposed to do and not do, and then framed her understanding within her regulation of that talk. Vicky talked about her understanding of women’s expectations and her initial sexual experimentations with other women while she had a boyfriend in high school:

I had never touched a girl before, until like high school. And I thought that this is great, it’s so different, but while I had my boyfriend, right? Who I lost my virginity to. Cause I thought, I guess this is what I’m supposed to do? And it felt right for me, but I guess I kind of loved him [boyfriend] as a father figure almost. It’s kind of weird, isn’t it?

Vicky managed her sexual experimentation with other women by placing her bad girl experience within a good girl relationship. According to Vicky, having sex with other women was permissible as long as she remained in a male-female relationship, a sexual relationship that good girls take part in. Like Elisa, Vicky also attempted to align her understanding of good girl expectations with her actions; yet both women’s understanding of what it meant to be a good girl



had varied limitations and definitions. Within their talk, they stretched these limitations in an attempt to align their images of themselves with their sexual desires, and they managed their sexual behavior so that they did not cross the line into bad girl territory. I found that within these discussions, limitations fluctuated and varied in accordance with women's outside influences and personal experiences. For example, Michelle, a 38-year-old, straight, African American woman from ULCC, also talked about struggling with her sexual desires outside a good girl framework:

A lot of times we [women] want to have sex, but we may not want to have vaginal sex.

But then, the desire to have sex or to have an orgasm or to experience those feelings, the conflict is in, "What will people think?" or "What will he think after I do this?" . . . that's the conflict right there. 'Cause you're like, I have these desires, I'm attracted to this guy,

I definitely want to see where it goes, even though it may not end in marriage, whatever.

Michelle's anxiety about her sexual desires and behaviors that went beyond the dominant social context limited her sexual subjectivity. Her work was caught up in her worrying about "What will people think" and negotiating these feelings with her desire to be sexual, particularly with partners that she may not end up married to. The dominant regulatory standard of what is socially acceptable for women halted Michelle in her tracks. However, talking out loud with women in the group allowed her to tease apart the negotiated meanings between what is acceptable and what she (and other women) felt restrained by. These acts of confronting and understanding dominant social discourses were part of the emotional work that the women undertook.

Based upon the binary of good girl and bad girl, the participants talked about being regulated on how they engaged in sexual activity, chose a partner, “came out” relative to their sexual identity, and/or communicated their desires with partners or peers. Being a good girl meant different things to different women; for women of color, it meant working to understand—and resist—the eroticization of their bodies and expectations of their sexuality based upon the dominant framework of the “hypersexual” woman of color; for lesbians, it meant silencing their sexual identity to remain safe in schools, at home, and at college; for white women, it meant avoiding becoming a “slut” or, if they were to have sex, to make sure it was within the context of a committed relationship. Although these good girl images overlapped among different cultures, sexualities, and races, these were the primary themes that emerged from the discussions.

### **Cautioned Discourses: Familial Relationships and Regulated Discussions**

#### **About Sex at Home**

Sex is a complicated topic in a society that regulates all that it represents to its members; sex signifies varied processes and representations according to different parties, in different situations, and at different times. Sexual decision-making is caught up in a family member’s past experiences, how parents negotiate powerful sexually normative discourses, and how daughters work to separate themselves from this kind of authority and attempt to exercise their independence. From their discussions about family, I understood that women never really felt that space was created to talk about their desire; rather, they thought their parents assumed that they were going to become sexual in college and therefore should be protected; or, if the women

were already sexual, they believed that their parents were responsible for regulating particular actions and behaviors, and ensuring that their daughters knew the consequences.

Parental and familial ideas, thoughts, and experiences with sex influenced how women in my study talked about confronting the different ways family members regulated their sexuality. Parents have traditionally been regarded as children's first sexual educators and authorities on sex, providing the foundation for sexual morals, values, and beliefs (Smiler, Ward, Caruthers, Merriwether, 2005). Although according to some women participants, parents may not have offered detailed and concrete facts on sexual behaviors to their children, they did typically offer up heterosexist themes about the sexual expectations of women and men and utilize heavy warnings—and sometimes threats—about the consequences of sex, such as STIs, pregnancy, rape, and the ruining of women's reputations (Smiler, et al., 2005). Parents also took their cues on talking to their children about sex from dominant social discourses and their previous personal sexual experiences as they too, like their daughters, were socially regulated in particular and complex ways. How women participants talked about their parents exemplified how both parents and children utilized social discourses as a measuring stick for regulating sexual behavior.

Women, like all young adults, therefore worked to separate themselves from their parents as authorities. How this separation came about was caught up in how women worked to exercise their sexual agency. Although participants' relationships with their families varied, most women shared a common experience of struggling to uphold their sexuality within a good girl discourse, while also working to understand themselves as sexual beings within the context of familial

relationships. In this section, I discuss family within the context of talk that circulated between mothers and fathers and at times, siblings. Through participants' talk, I found that families and their ideas about sex regulated women's behavior and shaped their sexual subjectivities. For example, Micah, a 30-year-old, straight African American woman from NU stated, "A great portion of my life I lived for other people," when speaking about her mother and brothers' influence upon her sexuality. Micah understood that her sexuality was meant to be managed by other people instead of something that she could explore for herself. As Casey, a 20-year-old, straight African American from NU had pleaded, "I just wish someone would explain it [sex] to me," women asked for more inclusive and comprehensive understanding from someone of what sex is all about; in particular, they wanted help understanding their own sexual desires.

How women communicated (or did not communicate) with their parents varied. Within this section, I organize the relationships that women had with their families around how they talked about the different ways that families shaped their sexual subjectivities. Whether the talk was negative, positive, pleasurable, or threatening, the topic of sex within the home mattered to women, no matter the content. In homes where women felt that discourse about sex was silenced or regulated, women spoke about parents regulating their sexuality by establishing rules for behaviors, actions, and desires. Instead of creating a space where women felt that they could talk about sex in the home, participants talked about how their parents regulated the opportunities in which women could build upon their sexual subjectivity in positive ways. What was not being said at home limited the space in which women could negotiate their sexual decision-making and develop a more inclusive understanding of what sex entailed. In the interest of separating

themselves from their parents and looking elsewhere to increase their understanding, women undertook the emotional labor of managing their sexual behavior in spite of their desire to be sexual while upholding their parents' expectations of being a good girl. These tensions shaped the way that these women talked about sex, framing their understanding of sex either in a context of (a) guilt or shame, (b) negative consequences that emerged from their parents' experiences, or (c) parents' denial of their daughters as sexual subjects, and instead positioning them as sexual *objects* of straight men's desire. Women's process of emotional labor and managing their sexual behavior was situated within the context of parental expectations.

### **Parental Past Experiences and the Emergence of Guilt and Shame Through Talk**

Some women spoke about how their parents talked about sex as an activity that would always lead to negative consequences based upon their parents' own past experiences. When the topic of guilt around sexuality was broached in focus group discussions, I asked the women what this guilt and shame stemmed from. A number of participants responded that it was their parents that had instilled the shame. Therefore, the messages delivered by parents about sex were often recalled by participants as negative, and parents' understanding about sex was "bad" or "dirty" unless it was within a male-female, committed relationship. As a result, shame and guilt influenced women's development of a sexual outlook, sexual desires, and identities. For example, Eva (19, straight, white, from CSU), talked about how her feelings of guilt influenced her sexual decisions because of how her mother had talked about sex to her and her sisters as something that was "dirty and bad," a view that Eva believed came from her father's lack of

faithfulness in her parents' marriage (a fact she had revealed earlier on within one of the focus groups):

On one hand, she [Eva's mother] wants me to always come to her and talk to her about things, but on the other hand, she's horrified [when I do]. When she found out I had sex for the first time . . . she cried and said, "Eva, you were supposed to be the best one, you were my last chance to do everything right," so it was just really awful. She has this really bad attitude . . . she is like, "Sex is bad," so it's really, really hard to deal with that.

Due to her mother's reaction, Eva believed (as she revealed later) that her mother had shifted the pain of her father's infidelity onto her in how she set particular expectations for Eva's sexual behavior. In response, Eva had to perform emotional labor to maintain her mother's image of what it would mean for her to "be the best one," or, in other words, a "good girl." For Eva to be considered a good girl according to her mother's expectation, she would need to either remain a virgin or to hide her sexual experiences from her mother. For example, Eva lamented,

Whenever I would have sex . . . it would feel good and I'd want to [have sex], but probably within the next couple of minutes I would just feel this overwhelming guilt, I would just feel so disgusted and so guilty for the longest time and I would start thinking about what my mom would say, like what if she knew what I was doing right now, and I would just feel like I'm the scum of the earth, you know? I mean, I've gone through therapy, and my therapist pretty much identified the part of the reason why I've never really been able to achieve sexual pleasure because it's either associated with "I want it, but it's bad," like that desire in me is somehow bad.

Eva understood her sexual desire to be “bad” and something to be ashamed of, and therefore struggled to figure out how she might experience sexual pleasure without attaching guilty feelings to her behavior and created anxiety for herself because of “what her mom would say.” Achieving sexual pleasure according to Eva would be to *fully* enjoy the act without guilt; even though initially sex would feel good for Eva, her guilt stopped her from finding the experience pleasurable in its entirety. Her work in trying to maintain a good girl image for her mother came into conflict with her “wanting it [sex]” but holding off from achieving sexual pleasure because she saw sex as “bad.”

Past experiences of parents, like the experiences of Eva’s mother, influenced the ways in which women talked about their sexual subjectivity. In order to develop a more positive outlook on their sexuality, some women sought to separate themselves from their parents and discover other ways to talk about sex or to find out where they could learn more about it. For example, Micah, a straight, African American 30-year-old from NU, talked about how she gained an understanding of sex as “being bad” from her mother, but broadened her perspective through classroom instruction. In our interview, she had revealed that her mother had been a victim of incest, and therefore consistently asked her as a young girl,

Did anyone touch you there, did anyone touch you there?” so I understood it [sex] to be something that was bad. That’s the only thing I knew about my mother as far as sex. I understood sex as being harmful, and you can get hurt. And then I took sex education in fifth grade, and it was more anatomical and learning about periods and stuff, and then after that it was more, you know, what I got to learn for myself.

Because of how her mother had talked about sex, Micah made connections outside of the home in order to educate herself on what sex could be like without the negative connotations. Her desire to explore the topic of sex outside of her mother's care defined this need to separate herself and learn about sex independently from her mother's experiences. For Micah, her need to have a more positive outlook on sex was evident in her work to identify a different authority.

Sonia, an 18-year-old, straight African American from NU, also talked about her mother's discomfort with the topic of sex because of past experiences:

My mother was not one to talk about sex to me. She grew up in a household with 13 brothers and sisters, and one of my aunts told me the story that when my other aunt was sexually active, my grandmother kind of like put her on the bed and was kind of checking to see, "Oh you're not a virgin, let me check," and it was crazy and I guess my mother, that kind of scared her and she didn't talk to me about these kind of things because she had her own experiences.

Sonia, although sensitive to her mother's past experiences, connected her mother's silence on the topic directly to how she understood sex to be. Sonia, along with Eva and Micah, believed that sex and *being* sexual was something that "good girls don't do," or it was always connected to negative consequences, such as experiencing emotional and physical pain. I found that much of participants' talk did involve how mothers communicated with their daughters. Mothers, like daughters, also negotiated dominant social discourses, which shaped the ways in which they communicated to their daughters. Feminist theorist Ann Ferguson (1989) argues that "male dominant symbolic codes governing motherhood and sexuality (such as good vs. bad



motherhood, good vs. bad sexuality) continue to control the social meaning” attached to what is good and bad sexual behavior and decisions (p. 176). These “codes” and social meanings were what *all* women—mothers, daughters, and sisters—needed to work to negotiate.

Some women utilized the fear of shaming or disappointing their parents in how they managed talk with their parents. They spoke about feeling guilty, or even threatened, for having sex because of the specific guidelines their parents had set, such as waiting for the right person or avoiding becoming pregnant. Tara, a straight, white 19-year-old from CSU, talked about the first time she and her mother discussed sex; her mother had told Tara that the purpose of sex was to have babies:

So I always felt that this [babies] was a serious consequence and so you should have sex with someone you see yourself having a baby with. My parents would always threaten me that if I ever got pregnant, they would never help me, never give me financial support.

So that kind of scared me, and I was not allowed to have sex basically.

Tara framed her sexuality within a context of receiving threats from her parents, particularly in terms of being cut off from the family financially. Her sexual subjectivity was affected because of how she understood that only negative consequences would stem from becoming sexually active. Tara’s fear of upsetting her parents was influential in how she managed her sexuality. She saw her sexual choices as limited because of how she understood that sexual partnership was only acceptable if it was with someone you would marry and have a family with.

Dara, a straight, white, 20-year-old woman from CSU, talked about how she avoided telling her mother that she was sexually active, “I’ve never told my mom I’m not a virgin. I’m

just hoping she assumes that's the truth, so we've never actually talked about it. It's just an awkward conversation to have, so I hope I'll just drop hints and she'll figure it out." Dara, in her attempt to withhold particular information about her sexual activity from her mother, silenced herself as a sexual subject. Dara also managed her talk so as to remain a good girl in her mother's eyes. It is not that Dara thought she should not share these intimate details with her mother; rather she felt she *could not* share those details. Being able to talk about sex is a significant catalyst for shaping one's sexual subjectivity.

Cuse, a 20-year-old NU senior from Korea who did not identify her sexual orientation, also talked about her emotions when she thought about herself as a sexual being, "There is . . . happy, and some kind of anger and some guilt. 'Cause my parents will be disappointed if they knew what I've done, that I had sex and my experiences. I feel like I have to control my sexual desires." Cuse's actions became a product of her emotional work as she wished to please her parents and maintain her image as a good girl because she believed that she needed to control her sexual desires. Cuse, so as not to disappoint her parents, admitted she needed to control her sexuality because of her fear of her parents or, perhaps, because of her fear of sex itself.

Regardless of the reason, both Cuse and Dara talked about hiding their sexual activities and desires from their parents because of how they worked to compromise their own sexual desires in alignment with how they understood their parents' expectations. As a result of this complex work, they denied their parents the opportunity to see them as sexual subjects, or perhaps more importantly, they denied *themselves* that opportunity. Parents grapple with seeing their children as sexual beings because some fear that sexual activity will only bring pain and

negative consequences to their children; so instead of acknowledging the possibility that their children are sexually active, parents sometimes only see other people's children as sexually active and deviant (Elliott, 2012). Some women, in response to parents' expectations, would rather work to hide their sexuality than to share it with their parents.

### **Management of Sexual Behavior Based on Parental Ideas of Hetero-normativity**

Through how women talked about their parents, I found that some parents managed talk with their daughters with the intention of protecting them, or the parents simply requested their daughters to abstain from sex altogether. Regarding some of these familial relationships, women described how their sexuality was either denied or ignored because of how parents privileged the hetero-normative discourse of male sexuality and aggression. For example, Deborah Tolman (2006) argued that "growing up in a culture that sexually objectifies women many girls learn that giving into embodied desires is unfeminine, unattractive and unacceptable" (p. 8). Some participants talked about how families framed their understanding of female sexuality around the concept of female objectification and how women should be cautious about male sexual aggression. For example, Sarah, a 21-year-old, white lesbian from NU, talked about the influence that her father's interpretation of the objectification of women had upon her sexuality,

I'm worried about being objectified, so I'm very conscious of . . . protecting yourself about objectification, sticking to the rules of, you know, a very intimate relationship. I don't go with the extreme of, you know, marriage, but . . . sort of the moral upbringing. My father's teaching of sex and the way that he viewed sex, which was pretty objectifying also, influence the way that I view it, because I've said I become a lot more

cautious, because I'm a lot more aware of the potential to be objectified, and the way women are viewed by a lot of men. Even though I'm not having sex with men, I'm still in a world that is at least half men, I'm still working the world of men, and so, I've got to preserve my sex, sort of esteem. In order to make me an equal runner.

Although Sarah was not specifically talking about sexual desire, she understood that despite being a lesbian in a male-dominated world, she would be seen as a straight woman who had a high probability of being objectified by men, a perception influenced by her father's beliefs. Sarah's father privileged the male perspective on sex by insisting that his daughter be protected from male sexual aggressiveness. Sarah talked further about how her father's perceptions of female objectification was shared with her as an attempt to protect her: "He believes that men only want women for sex, and women only want men for power." Influenced by her father, she saw herself as a woman—and as a sexual being—through an objectified and heterosexist lens. Although Sarah identified as a lesbian and was out to her father, her father's understanding of Sarah's sexuality—and how he established particular regulations around it—were rooted in a dominant heterosexist framework, thereby limiting the possibility of discussion with Sarah on what it means to be a lesbian.

According to lesbian or gay participants like Sarah, families either ignored or did not validate their daughter's sexuality. According to Solebello and Elliott (2011), "Research examining parents' gender and sexual lessons to their children emphasizes the prominent role hetero-normativity plays in these lessons." For example, women admitted that parents affirmed that being in a male-female relationship was the only acceptable and available way for their

daughters to live their sexual lives, omitting any possibilities of identifying any other way but “straight.” Sarah’s father’s beliefs, informed by a heterosexist and gendered social framework, shaped the conversations the two had together about sex and, ultimately, how his daughter understood sex. When it came to her sexual identity, Sarah said, “I think he just doesn’t really think about it. Like I think he is really pretty oblivious. We never talked about that whole girl on girl thing, I think that would make him uncomfortable because I am his daughter, so you gotta separate me from the sex.” By saying, “You gotta separate me from the sex,” Sarah understood her father as dismissing her as a sexual being entirely, by ignoring her identity as a lesbian; and that the reality of her being a sexual being in general was perhaps uncomfortable for him. On the other hand, her father may have dismissed the conversation with her because he *did* recognize her as a sexual being and therefore dealt with his own uncomfortable feelings about this realization by limiting the discussion of sex. Either way, Sarah’s sexual subjectivity was disrupted because of how she understood and heard her father’s beliefs on sexuality.

In fact, fathers in particular constructed and reinforced male sexual privilege and being straight as the “right” form of sexuality; by not fully realizing lesbian or bisexual identity they may have believed that their daughter’s sexual orientation was more of a “phase” they were going through before permanently establishing their identity as a straight person (Solebello & Elliott, 2011). Therefore, how families addressed, or did not address, their daughter’s experience of being a lesbian within the home drew regulatory lines between socially normative sexual behaviors as opposed to “bad” and deviant behavior. For example, Johan, a 19-year-old, white lesbian from NU, talked about how her father dismissed her sexual identity: “He still likes to

pretend, he doesn't think that I'm not straight, but in his head I think somewhere it just doesn't register all the way, I guess? I'll come home and he'll be like, "So any boys?" and I'm like, "No, dad, you know it's not what I'm all about!" For Johan, she had to continue to affirm her sexuality to her father. Although she did not hide her identity from him, she worked to remind him of who she was sexually, despite his feigned ignorance on the matter. For both Sarah and Johan, their sexual desire to be with another woman was seen as shameful and wrong and going against an established social norm. The emotional labor women performed to manage their sexual desire based upon these restrictions clouded the reality of their sexual subjectivity and also how their sexual identity could be valued and recognized.

Although few studies have explored how fathers understand their role in their children's decision-making, research has found that fathers of daughters deny women their own sexuality by "minimizing and infantilizing their sexuality" (Solebello & Elliott, 2011, p. 297) through their discourse and expectations of sexual behavior. Fathers also assume that their daughters need protection from hetero-sexist encounters with men and define their sexuality as vulnerable and in need of saving (Solebello & Elliott, 2011). For example, Erica, a straight, white 21-year-old from CSU, described how her father reacted when he found out she was on birth control:

He's like, "What the hell are you on birth control for? I'm so mad right now, I could slap you," and I've never heard that from my dad, so I was like really, really taken aback from that, and like why would Dad say something like that? And then he apologized for it later, and he's like, "Alright, don't get pregnant."

Erica believed that, because of how her father reacted to her being sexually active, sex was something not only to be ashamed of, but her sexuality was something that warranted anger from her father. Not only was his reaction surprising to Erica, but it also left little space for her to want to speak with him further about sex. In his attempt to protect her, he ended up regulating his daughter's behavior by maintaining a threatening attitude. Marie, a straight, white 19-year-old from ULCC, also talked about the shame her father attached to her sexual decisions when she became pregnant in high school:

I have to say the only sit-down talk that I had with my parents about sex was the whole “wait for marriage” kind of thing. And when I had to sit down—I will never forget the night that I told my dad that I was pregnant. He looked me straight in the eye and told me that I ruined my family's reputation. I don't think I could have stayed home pregnant with my family and dealt with the disappointment. Because I was already crying myself to sleep, up all night every night, dealing with the decisions I had to make for myself and then also dealing with them [her family] trying to help me make the decision, but really wanting me to make the decision they wanted me to make. And that decision was adoption.

The disappointment her father felt that she had brought upon the family caused Marie to believe that her sexual decisions were no longer hers to make, but were now her family's responsibility to regulate. Marie understood that the only choice she could make was the one that her family wanted her to make, not her own choice. Marie managed her sexual decisions by how she understood how her family, in particular her father, wanted her to behave sexually and responded

to consequences accordingly. Marie and Erica saw their parents as “authorities,” and their parents’ reactions had an emotional impact upon them, perhaps because of their fear of disappointing their parents and/or because of their work in attempting to remain “good girls.”

Like Marie’s father, some women expressed how parents communicated to their daughters that being sexually active would not only “damage” their daughters’ reputation, but also would increase the risk of them becoming pregnant, preventing them from educational and career achievements. Women believed that their parents’ jobs were to protect their daughter’s sexuality, not necessarily to recognize them as sexual beings with valid sexual pleasures and desires. These particular messages influenced how women made sexual decisions and added to their overall work for familial acceptance and affirmation of being a “good girl.” For example, Nicole, a 21-year-old Dominican from NU who identified as straight, talked about her anxiety on finding a job after college and her father’s influence,

My father, he’s ecstatic that I’m graduating [from college]. He’s like, “Oh my daughter is going to become a professional,” and I’m kind of disappointed in myself because I still don’t have a job, I’m here sending resumes to every company that I can, because I feel like it’s going to be a disappointment to them, not even me. Like . . . I was always responsible when it came to doing little things with my boyfriend. I always had the “What if,” like, What if something went wrong, even if I was, you know, doing it [safe sex] in a safe way. Like what if something went wrong, what if my parents found out, like what would they think of me? And I didn’t want them to think any less of what they



already thought of me, because they already held me on a pedestal and I think that influenced my choice to wait and have sex.

According to dominant social discourse, a woman that is not a good girl or does not reign in or control her sexuality is labeled as a “slut” or a girl without a future (Tannenbaum, 2000). Nicole reigned in her sexuality because of how she understood her family’s expectations and what would happen if she acted like a bad girl. She believed that not only would she disappoint her parents, but her decisions would also have a significant impact on her future career and her family’s reputation. Therefore, her abstinence became not just her choice, but her parents’, as well. It is also possible that her understanding and anxiety was transferred to her parents, affecting their attitudes towards their daughter’s sexual subjectivity. Although her father’s pride in her was clear, so was his message that Nicole not let the family down by making “bad” choices. Nicole worked to avoid that image in order to avoid disappointing the family.

Women also talked about how parents used pregnant family members as lessons for daughters to protect themselves and/or avoid sexual activity. For example, Megan, a straight, white 18-year-old woman from ULCC, talked about how her family reacted to her step-sister’s pregnancy:

It probably was the biggest influence on my decisions as far as sex. I mean, my stepsister got pregnant at a younger age, and my mom was just beside herself, she was like immediately talking to us [her siblings], and I just remember that she would be disappointed if that happened to me.

Megan continued to recall how her mother had spoken to her stepsister after she discovered that she was pregnant:

She [mother] was like, “How could you do that? How could you when you know there are so many ways to prevent it? Now the whole family has to change their lives to support this.” I don’t want to say problem, because it’s not a problem, but everyone has to adjust to the new way that life was going to be changed. If a girl gets pregnant, she’s the one that is really looked down upon. She would be the one that everyone is staring at. I don’t think that it would be nearly as much focus on the guy.

A component of Megan’s sexual education was learning from her step-sister’s decisions and how these decisions became framed as “mistakes” instead of as choices. Megan’s decision-making was influenced by her mother’s reactions and therefore Megan managed her behaviors to avoid her mother’s disappointment. She also understood that women who became pregnant were more apt to be judged not just by their families, but also by the larger society, peers at school, teachers, community members, etc. Megan knew that the consequences of sex were more physically evident for a woman, causing her to be judged more strongly than the male partner in a male-female relationship. The responsibility did not rest upon the shoulders of the man; it instead fell on the pregnant woman who served as a physical reminder of a sexual consequence or “mistake.”

From how some women talked about their relationships with their families, rarely did they think that their parents made space to talk about desire, pleasure, or what it meant to see their daughters as sexual beings. Molly, a straight, white 23-year-old from CSU, talked about the anxiety she developed around sex because it had always been made clear by family members that

talking about sex in the home was uncomfortable, shameful, and something that should not be publicly discussed. She said, “With my parents it’s always been this don’t ask, don’t tell kind of thing. It’s like you just don’t talk about it.” Emma, a 19-year-old, queer white woman from NU, believed that not talking about sex with your parents is an unspoken expectation for youth:

I feel like I can’t talk to them. I guess it’s been instilled in me like your parents aren’t supposed to know you’re having sex. You’re supposed to be like this little pure flower that’s not been tainted, and so I feel like I have to clam up and hide my sexuality and that’s when I feel repressed. I feel like I should never have to hide my sexuality around my parents, but I do.

Emma not only worked to hide her sexuality, but also needed to work to find space outside of the home where she did not feel restricted in expressing her sexual identity. Because of her parents’ expectations of her being a “good girl,” she already understood that she did not fall within that category. Women, in efforts to be “good girls,” ended up complicating their sexual subjectivity, as their desires became confused with parental expectations. Some women, like Beatrix, a white 19-year-old lesbian from NU, struggled with a home life that she described as sheltered:

Sex was never talked about. I honestly didn’t know what sex was until I was probably 17. I wasn’t allowed to be in sex education. I was raised thinking, you know, that I was going to be a housewife, please my man right after college. It’s like screw this. They don’t trust me. They’re just very overprotective, very sheltering.

Beatrix’s sex education was limited because her parents chose to regulate what instruction she received. She admitted that her ignorance of sex further suppressed any expression of her sexual

identity. Parents' silencing then on the topic of sex within the home ended up interrupting women's sexual curiosity, sexual drive, and pleasures. In listening to women talk about sex, sexual decision-making was a complicated process, not just because of how they worked to understand how they were regulated and to managed their behavior accordingly, but also because of how they negotiated the power of discourse that influences *all* family members, parents, and daughters alike. Being able to talk about sex within the home required work on all levels from everyone involved in the discussion; being sexually subjective depended upon the talk that happened.

Sexual talk, and what was being said and not said within conversations at home, complicated the shaping of women's sexual subjectivities. As research indicates, "Warm instructive and open communication is linked to less sexual risk taking whereas negative and prohibitive messages are linked to greater sexual risk taking" (Smiler, et al., 2005, p. 43). Furthermore, Hirschman, Impett, and Schooler argue in their 2006 study on late adolescent girls and sexuality, women who were described as "less sexually self-objectified" in society were also women who spoke about "having open communication with their parents, and this openness often extended to conversations about sexuality" (Hirshman, et al., 2006, p. 9). Although participants talked about different familial relationships and the varied discussions they had with their parents about sex, maintaining a good girl image for parents was particularly important for these women—despite their sexual activities and decisions. Both parents' and daughters' negotiation of and understanding of dominant discourse and its regulations restricted the positive and pleasurable possibilities that sex can bring. Restricted conversation within the family homes

impacted the space for growth and engagement of women's sexual subjectivity. Open and supportive talk, in contrast, contributed to the building of sexual subjectivity.

### **The Untapped Discourse of Female Sexual Desire in Formal Education**

Female sexuality is consistently taken up as a topic to be debated, analyzed, and regulated by others. Schools, in particular, were sites for regulation of women and the sexual education and messages they received. Reconstruction of these expectations according to women's own desires is emotional work; as Michelle Fine (2006) argues in her piece on adolescent females and sexuality, schools—often the beginning point of youth's social construction of sexual identity and desire—position young women primarily as potential victims of male sexual aggression, and therefore “seriously compromise young women and men's development of sexual subjectivities” (p. 297). Fine's work on female adolescent sexuality primarily focuses on the “missing discourse of desire” within educational curricula and how curricula can affect women's sexual decision-making and sexual subjectivity. Fine (1988) argues that young women are left little space to discover what they desire sexually because schools' sexual education curricula “authorize the suppression of a discourse of female sexual desire” and instead center more upon how women need to protect themselves from male sexual aggression, a framework that is heterosexist and denies the recognition of women as sexual agents (p. 30). Schools, like families, are influenced by larger forces of social power and the dominant discourses of female sexuality. Women in this study narrated the ways they believed their education was regulated and how they made meaning of pedagogical tactics used to warn youth of consequential actions in order to avoid any encouragement of sexual activity. Women had to work to figure out how to find a sexual

“authority” that would provide more inclusive information and be able to develop and construct their own perceptions on the topic. For example, Melissa, a 19-year-old, white, straight woman from CSU, talked about her sexual education as,

sticking to the basics. They, the authority figures, don’t really get into any of the details. They teach you about all the risks that happen and why you shouldn’t do it, but they are never actually like, I mean, I think about it, and I’m like, “Well why wouldn’t [teachers] tell us why we should do it.” It just doesn’t seem something that would happen, they would never encourage us to have sex, they would never tell us the pros as opposed to the cons of having sex. I don’t know if that’s because they think we already know the pros, or they just don’t want to share it with us, because it will make us want to do it. Like, that always confused me.

Melissa’s confusion about her sexual education stemmed from how she believed the curriculum was presented in regulatory ways by authority figures, or adults, making sexual decisions for her. Melissa wanted to discuss what it meant to have sex without consequences. Within her talk, she questioned why authority figures chose to share only the “cons of sex,” while also recognizing the power adults hold in restricting curricula in particular ways to communicate only the negative consequences of sexual activity. Sex painted in a negative light was a strategy adults used in order to restrict sexual activity in youth. Women wished to explore their own desire and pleasures, yet first worked to understand the sexual expectations and restrictions that had been made for them within educational institutions and communicated by authority figures.

It is not that men do not also perform a certain level of emotional labor to understand the sexual expectations and roles assigned by authority figures; however, men are provided a more clarified framework of what it means for them to be sexual and understand their sexual desire.

As Jessica Fields (2008) argued in her study on sexual education curricula within the schools,

Sex education classrooms contribute not only to the silencing of nonconforming sexuality but also to privileging of already dominant sexual desire and behaviors; sex educators often recognize male sexual pleasure, such as wet dreams, ejaculations and erections; in contrast, the physiology of girls' sexual pleasure—clitorises, orgasms and lubrication are usually absent.” (p. 135)

For example, when participants talked about education in the schools, they often referred to the curricula as the “puberty” or the “period” talk, where the focus of female sexuality was situated within the framework of procreation, saying “no” to sex, and menstruation. Some of the participants claimed that they were not made aware of what the boys had learned because some classes on sexual health were separated by gender. Not only did this separation affirm a dominant heterosexist discourse, but it also regulated ways in which men and women could be educated. Those women who were educated on both men's and women's sexuality talked about how sexuality was understood as either “boys having wet dreams” or women “getting their periods” and “having cramps.” Already early on in their formal education, women and men were learning the privileging of male pleasures (i.e., the “uncontrollable” situation of wet dreams for men) and the absence of female desire; instead, the focus for women's sexuality zeroed in on menstruation and how that process was related to “readying” the body for childbirth. For

example, Marie explained the difference she noticed between men's and women's sexual education in her elementary school experience:

They just showed how we got periods, what happens and how you get pregnant and how an egg works. Like how, like they didn't show how they [boys] came [had an orgasm] and everything, they just showed how they work, how we work. How an egg is released through the fallopian tubes, and how it comes into the uterus and how if it's fertilized, it attaches to the uterus wall and everything. And then for the boys, they showed how he gets an erection and how he works.

Marie was able to explain how her body worked relative to making a baby as a *woman*, but she also talked about how she understood what it meant for a man to become sexually aroused. For Marie, she did not find that her sexual education explained how women come to be aroused or if her having sexual desire was a possibility. Instead, her understanding was limited to the biological nuances of sex. Melissa, a white, straight 19-year-old from CSU, talked about what it meant for her to have little to no education on sex when she first became sexually active:

When I started to become sexually active, I kind of put stuff together, but nobody actually ever explained to me, the like social or relationship implications of that because when I first had sex, I thought that you had sex once, I didn't think you ever had sex again. Because that's how people kind of explained it, like they didn't say, "Oh well sex is kind of like, it begins like a habit, or it begins a pattern." It was kind of just like, I guess I didn't really enjoy it [sex] that much, but it was like, "Oh we do this again sometime?" I just kind of didn't understand that. Where was I supposed to learn that? I



don't know, at the time it was really confusing and I just didn't understand where I was already supposed to have that information from. If I had understood, I don't know if I would have made the same decision, maybe I would have gone about it differently. I mean I don't regret it now, because it's already over, and I've moved on. I just think back, why was I so . . . left out?

Melissa's frustration about her lack of education impacted how she felt about the onset of her first sexual experience. Because she talked about feeling "left out," she was confused as why other people, particularly her boyfriend, understood the nuances of sexual activity and behaviors, but she did not. Melissa's lack of education on how sex worked regulated the ways in which she made meaning of her sexual desire and how she negotiated her sexual decisions as a woman. Attempting to understand how sex worked, Melissa's missing idea of her own sexual desire caused confusion and an unclear idea about where she could receive more information. Because sexual education programs continue to emphasize the negative consequences of sex and affirm traditional sex roles, young women moved through their sexual experiences with little education and tools to make healthy sexual decisions (Fine, 1988, 2008). "With little acknowledgement of the ways in which [women] may enjoy sex and sexuality, young women are left alone to make sense of their feelings, wondering if they are the only ones who have them" (Ashcraft, 2003, p. 43). When sexual education is taught within a more biological and clinical context, there is little room for youth, in particular women, to understand the emotional and physical aspects of sex. Melissa admitted that she felt that her decision might have been different—perhaps she would

have even waited to have sex—if she had been provided a clearer and more comprehensive picture of what sex involved.

In addition to menstruation and pregnancy, AIDS—and the heightened focus on other sexually transmitted diseases—has become the main focus within most sexual curricula. For example, Tara, a straight, white 19-year-old from CSU, talked about the tactics used in her curriculum in high school:

In high school, it was really all about the negative consequences and they [health instructors] didn't talk about how you do it, they just talked about all the horrible things that happen after you are in the situation, more threats and scare tactics. They really emphasized abstinence as being the best birth control.

For Tara, her sexual education, and therefore her sexual desire, was framed within a negative, consequential context leaving little room for her to discover the possibilities of her sexual desire. Instead, she understood her sexual education as being framed within a context of threats and scare tactics. Women managed their sexual behaviors and decisions in response to how they understood these negative consequences. I am not arguing that sexual education curricula should not cover the consequences that could stem from sexual activity; however, I do believe that the “centrality of this fear handicaps the teacher’s ability to discuss more positive aspects of sexuality” (Moran, 2000, p. 210). Likewise, participants within my study, as Melissa discussed earlier, desired the inclusion and discussion of emotional intimacy within the overall curricula, including sexual desire. As a young woman complained in Jeffrey Moran’s (2000) research on sexual education, “They [educators] just tell us to prepare ourselves emotionally, but they don’t

tell us what it means to be emotionally prepared” (2000, p. 234). Isabelle, a straight, white 19-year-old from ULCC, agreed:

Like, how you would feel after like you had sex with someone and then things didn’t work out between the two of you and how you may feel after or like . . . the stronger feelings that you may get for someone if you give yourself to them, you know? They [schools] don’t really talk about that; they just talk about how you may get this disease or you may get pregnant.

Isabelle asked for a more comprehensive curriculum that included the emotional aspects of sexual intimacy. The education that she referred to left out particular components of postsexual experience and what it means to be sexual, therefore diminishing an opportunity to more broadly shape one’s sexual subjectivity. Based upon their educational experiences, women understood sex as something dangerous and an activity that would only result in negative consequences. Their emotional labor of managing their desires in alignment with their education increased their anxiety and need for a broader discussion of women’s sexual desire.

According to participants, sexual education was either omitted by the teacher or narrowed specifically down to a medicalized, sterile experience and less intimate process. Furthermore, because their sexual education was positioned from a hetero-normative standpoint, some women found that their curriculum discounted emotions and sexual desires because they did not fall within a dominant ideological pattern (love, marriage, and a baby carriage). No matter the content of sexual education, youth are left to negotiate lessons with significant implications for their emerging sense of sexual subjectivity as sexual beings (Fields, 2008). For

some women, human sexuality was just a chapter in a health book. The process of their emotional labor involved their attempts in discovering additional authorities on sex that could provide more inclusive information related to sex and sexuality. Women understood that it was up to them to seek out this information from other sources, whether family, friends, or peers; their emotional work was found within their struggle to find this information and better construct their understanding of sex.

### **Social and Sexual Expectations of the College Experience**

There is a social expectation, reinforced by the media and pop culture, that “everyone is doing it” in college. It is not that everyone is necessarily “doing it” (having sex), but it is the expectation that the college experience will provide young people the space and freedom to do so, as a result of the rise of mixed-gender housing and the negation of curfews that existed in the 1960s and ‘70s (Bogle, 2008, Heldman & Wade, 2010). In the focus groups, women talked about college as a site that was free from parental restrictions and therefore allowed for less restricted sexual experimentation, a “safe bubble.” Because they were no longer living underneath their parents’ roofs, women had the opportunity to claim some freedom from prior restraints that came from living with their parents. Although college is talked about as a site for sexual agency, women talked about who and what at college placed restrictions on their sexual subjectivity, such as peers, partners, and the lack of sexual health resources. For example, Vicky, a 21-year-old Dominican from NU who was in a relationship with a woman, talked about how she understood sex as a college student: “In college, everybody expects that [sex] has happened already. It’s done with, you’re coming to college now, and this is what we do.” Vicky understood

sex in college as an act where participation and having experience is already assumed because of social and peer expectations.

Prior to coming to college, sex was seen as a rite of passage that many had already completed and/or were about to complete based upon these expectations. For example, Marisa, a straight, white 19-year-old from ULCC, talked about the assumptions regarding sex she had while living on campus, “You’re always around [it] like living in a dorm, you know? People hook up. And then you’re at a party, you see it. And it’s just like, you’re constantly around it, you see it, wherever you go.” Sex was a topic that continuously emerged from campus life and living; Marisa understood sex as something that was “always happening,” something her peers were consistently participating in whether it was at parties, within each other’s room, or at outings off-campus. Therefore, she understood sex and hooking up as a necessary stitch in the fabric of campus life. Marisa talked about sex as an act that one could not escape as a college student, whether you were participating in an act or hearing about it from others. Although sex was understood as part of the college experience, this assumption ended up influencing how women managed their sexual behaviors.

Although women talked about college as a site where sexual experimentation occurred, social expectations of female sexuality did not change within the confinements of ivy-covered walls. Campus culture may encourage women to “go wild” through sexual experimentation, yet women still needed to work to uphold their roles as “gatekeepers” and “good girls” regardless of how pop culture and society imagined college students’ sexual lives. For example, the college experience privileges straight persons’—particularly straight men’s—sexual activity. Studies

show that (within male-female relationships) because men's sexual pleasure is privileged over women's pleasure, men derive more sexual pleasures from encounters, whereas women are believed to feel more of the emotional backlash (Heldman & Wade, 2010). Therefore, women still needed to negotiate the tension between what it meant to be a good girl and a bad girl within this space.

For example, research done on the hooking-up culture in college suggests that women are bearing the emotional brunt of sexual activity. Regenerus and Uecker (2011) argue that men are benefitting sexually from hooking up, while women fall short because they are assumed to only desire emotional connections and committed relationships in opposition to their straight male partners. Even if women specifically seek out sexual pleasure from hooking up, the "odds of mutual orgasm are far smaller in a hook-up than in a longstanding sexual relationship" (Regenerus & Uecker, 2011, p. 110). What these hetero-normative studies ignored was the invisible work that women struggle with; although I found within my discussions that women do desire the emotional and intimate connection of a romantic relationship, this does not mean that their desire does not come without a more physical innate sexual desire in addition to an emotional one. For instance, Marie, a white, straight 19-year-old from ULCC, talked about how her previous sexual education neglected to talk about the emotional attachment that would come with having sex for the first time:

They don't tell you how attached you get to the person, how much your feelings grow from that or what it feels like after, like I was not expecting that at all. But I wasn't even expecting it [the emotional attachment], so I was all confused. I didn't have anyone to

talk to, so that's what I wish. I wish that someone would do a study on the emotional attachment that comes with it, and explain that to people that get taught in schools.

Marie narrated her feelings in a subjective way, by describing her emotional attachment and the intimacy that became linked with her sexual activity. Requiring more than just biological facts, Marie felt as if her emotions in regard to sexuality had gone unrecognized. Her lack of having anyone to talk to prompted her search for a more experienced authority who could share their experiences with sexual relationships. When it comes to sexual subjectivity and agency, the desire for an emotionally committed relationship trumps all others because it agrees with a socially established expectation for women. Not all women desire to hook up in college; however, that is often the only available choice because of this culture that has been established on college campuses.

As gatekeepers, women must either agree to hooking up or make particular choices that will keep them "safe" from men's sexual aggression, as discussed earlier in the literature review. For example, Alex, a 22-year-old Southeast Asian woman from ULCC who identified as gay, talked about her sexual education in high school:

I would have liked to see more of a discussion of what girls are allowed to say, like basically they can say whatever they want, be open, demand, you know, whatever they want, their perspective is valued, their mentality is valued, their emotions are important. That never got addressed.

What Alex confirmed in her talk is what Melissa had commented on previously: wanting adults to teach women—and men—how to say yes *in addition to* what it means to say no. In her talk,

Alex affirmed the regulatory social discourse by her choice of words: “what girls are allowed to say,” emphasizing how women are currently limited in their discussion around sex. According to Alex, her education was limited in specific ways and therefore she asked that women’s sexual subjectivity be affirmed by not just adults within the educational system, but also within the larger social structure.

### **Resisting the “Aggressor”: The Privileging of Male Sexual Desire and the Positioning of the “Good Girl” as Gatekeeper**

Sexual objectification of females within a heterosexual dominant society affirms that women’s sexuality should be viewed, evaluated, and validated by others (Tolman, et al., 2006). As discussed previously, women are situated as the sexual gatekeepers within a heterosexual context; in other words, society expects men to initiate sexual activity and be sexually assertive while women are meant to be passive gatekeepers who follow the male lead and allow—or do not allow—for sexual activity to take place (Smiler, et al., 2005). In order to uphold society’s ideological discourse, women are educated to resist male sexual desire unless it meets the social acceptability of what it means to be a “good girl.” Women’s emotional labor becomes the management of not just *their* desire, but the male’s as well.

Dominant gendered discourses—that are also racialized and hetero-normative—have described female sexuality as being void of sexual desire and that women are more focused on love and connection than on engaging in sexual activities outside the context of a romantic relationship (Diamond, 2008; Irvine, 1994; Tannenbaum, 2000). For example, the discourse of women as sexual gatekeepers hold women responsible for both their *and* men’s sexual behaviors.



As the gendered sexual discourse “boys will be boys” demonstrates, young men should not be held responsible due to their assumed intense, overwhelming, and *uncontrollable* sexual desire (Diamond, 2008; Richardson, 1993). Therefore, young women’s perceived lack of sexual desire is the “necessary linchpin” in organizing and controlling adolescent sexuality (Diamond, 2008, p. 15). As a result, women are often the targets of colleges’ programmatic initiatives such as workshops on date rape prevention or self-defense classes in order to uphold social expectations and ordered sexual scripts.

As discussed earlier, women’s discourse on female sexuality is shaped by the education that they received in school, emphasizing the dominant social belief that men are expected to have knowledge about sex and sexual desire, while women who require the same sexual knowledge are considered to be “slutty” or promiscuous (Phillips, 2000, Tannenbaum, 2000). For example, Sarah, a 21-year-old, white lesbian from NU stated,

I remember sex being this vast mystery and you know you get that idea that you want to know a lot about it [sex] but you don’t want to have done it [voice lowers to a whisper] because that’s slutty. But all the guys are expected to know about it.

Sarah’s sexual curiosity was regulated by the gendered assumption of what women should and should not know about sexuality. She knew that men were supposed to understand sexual pleasure and follow through on their sexual desires; but women who mirrored the same activity were considered bad girls or sluts because they either wanted to have and/or were having sex. Women’s sexual pleasure was not considered necessary to understand within a male-female relationship; however, pleasing a man was an act women were expected to have knowledge

about. Male sexual desire and needs therefore become privileged, perpetuating the sexual objectification of women and social expectations of female sexuality. The “male sexual drive” discourse, situated within a heterosexist framework, tells us that men, not women, have—and should have—a natural sexual drive that is compelling, purposeful, and aggressive in its drive to fulfillment (Philips, 2000, p. 58). Women as sexual gatekeepers are therefore forced to give in—or resist—the male sexual drive, both acts which require work on women’s behalf and a silencing of their own sexual desires, regardless of their desire to have sex or not.

Because men are seen as sexually aggressive and as always wanting and *having* sex, women need to affirm and define the reasons for why *they* have sex, whom they have sex with, and if the sex is not with men, justify their experience of being a lesbian or bisexual. Normalized guidelines for men’s and women’s sexuality are particularly gendered in that women’s sexuality, and the onset of her first sexual experience, is monitored much more closely than that of men’s sexual behaviors and decisions (Carpenter, 2011). For example, women come to understand their virginity as something that eventually is “lost”; it is a component of themselves that they end up “giving” to their partner. To make up for and justify this “loss,” women come to understand that sex is justified when it is done within the confines of a heterosexual, committed relationship. Consider Vicky’s (21-year-old Dominican from NU who is in a relationship with a woman) and Marisa’s (white, straight 19-year-old from CSU) explanation as to why they had sex for the first time; Vicky admitted, “I justified my virginity loss because I was in a [male-female] relationship, so it made it okay for me to talk about it, ‘cause I think it was a little more accepted, than you just having sex to have sex.” For Vicky, she justified the loss of her virginity because she was in

a committed, straight relationship, a fulfillment of a good girl image. She managed her sexual behaviors through her explanation of how her decision would be accepted by others. Marisa also talked about the loss of her virginity, admitting that “the first time I lost my virginity, I would say it’s more like I felt like I needed to, you know, he was talking me into it.” Marisa, convinced by her male partner to have sex and recognizing her role in satisfying that need and her understanding of male-female relationships, caused her to make a decision solely based upon what she felt that she *needed* to do in order to spare the relationship, rather than sex being something she *wanted* to do. I found through women’s talk that sex for some women needed to be affirmed within the confines of a male-female and committed relationship, not just to respond to male sexual needs, but also to re-situate themselves within this context as “good girls.”

Furthermore, I found that many of the participants’ (those that identified as straight) talk centered upon what men wanted, even when the conversation and/or question first addressed was what *women* wanted. For example, responses to a question I had asked all women, “What does sexual pleasure mean to you?” often circulated back to male pleasure and desire. For participants, male pleasure was easy to define, point at, and recognize not only because of the education that women had received (from school and from other peers), but also because of the fact that men are comfortable with asking for what they want, how they want it, and how often they desire it. Donna, a 19-year-old, white straight woman from ULCC stated, “It’s like you have to keep your partner happy, or they’re going to go somewhere else.” According to Donna, pleasing her male partner was her responsibility or he would find someone else that would please him sexually. Therefore, Donna’s subjectivity became caught up in her work to understand her

role in what it meant to ensure that men are pleased sexually. For some women, being perceived as an experienced partner increases their sexual capital, therefore positioning them as more viable as sexual, and eventually romantic, partners by males (Regenerus & Uecker, 2011). I talk about sexual capital as a privileged social “currency” that women found valuable in order to keep and attract men. For instance, Tara, a straight, white 19-year-old from CSU, explained what it meant to be sexually attractive to men:

In high school and even now, sometimes I feel insecure, like I used to have low self-esteem and so when there was a boy that I was dating, if he wanted to kiss me and like be with me and stuff, that made me feel like prettier, like you know, like attractive so I felt better about myself. So then sex, you know, that’s like the ultimate, and so when I had low self-esteem and stuff, if a boy wanted me, he was attracted me, if he wanted to do that [have sex] with me, that must have meant that I was like awesome and pretty and stuff and then if he did not want to do it anymore, or if it didn’t work out, it just made me feel horrible, like used and dirty.

According to Tara, her sexual capital (such as her attractiveness) increased if a man became sexually interested in her; her esteem and capital was solely dependent upon what the man felt and how he was sexually attracted to her. Tara used this sexual capital as a way of making meaning of her sexuality; according to Tara, sex was the “ultimate” way for a man to prove that he loved or wanted her. Therefore, a man could control whether Tara felt “awesome and pretty” or “used and dirty.” Tara’s sexual pleasure and experience were regulated based upon on a male partner’s affirmation of her as a viable sexual partner.

As mentioned previously, research has found that men's sexual pleasure takes precedence over women's sexual pleasure or sexual experimentation within male-female sexual relationships, particularly in college hook-ups (Heldman & Wade, 2010). Although some college women may seem empowered to have sex, their sexual desire at times is fueled by their need to respond to male desire. For example, when talking in groups about exploring sexual pleasure, participants discussed manual and oral sex in the context of pleasing a man, not a woman. Missy, a straight, white 19-year-old from ULCC, talked about how in her experience men prefer oral sex over manual stimulation or "hand jobs":

I hear that guys hate hand jobs . . . they would rather you not do anything at all than give them a hand job. They can do it themselves, so why even bother. So you don't want to give them a blow job because you don't really know them, but if you give them a hand job and it's like eighth-grade stuff and it's all a mess [talking about ejaculation].

While Missy talked through the process of pleasuring men, her understanding of sexual desire was situated within the framework of male sexual desire. Missy's work here was about figuring out what men wanted sexually and how she thought about it. She understood that there was an expectation of women to know how to perform oral sex, even if the women did not particularly enjoy performing the act, and she aligned her own behavior with this expectation by talking through this process. However, her navigation and discussion of sexual pleasure seemed to be void of what was specifically sexually pleasing to *her* and what would make *her* feel good.

Participants' fear of not knowing what to do and "looking stupid" in front of their more sexually experienced male partners came through their discussions on lack of sexual experience,

which silenced their own sexual desires. For example, women discussed their first time having sex within the context of learning how to please a man. Mary, a straight, white 18-year-old from ULCC, talked about her first time having sex with her boyfriend:

I had no idea of what was going to happen at all . . . like he was [sexually] experienced, he had girlfriends before me . . . I felt like I wasn't going to live up to his expectations, that I didn't know what to do and he was going to [know what to do], and I wasn't going to be good enough.

Mary's understanding of sexual experience was fraught with confusion and anxiety over her lack of sexual knowledge because of how she perceived her own inexperience. As a result, Mary framed her experience within her anxiety of having to live up to her boyfriend's expectations, believing it would be her fault if the sexual encounter was a bad one due to her inexperience. Because women like Mary claimed "not knowing what to do" when it came to having sex for the first time, women's lack of knowledge allowed space for their experienced partners to lead the way and educate them during sexual activities. For example, Melissa, a white, straight 19-year-old from CSU talked about her first time having sex:

It was initially my boyfriend who, you know, introduced the idea of sex to me, and it was initially him who showed me everything I needed [sexually] 'cause I literally had no idea before I got into bed. I guess it was the idea that I don't need to please you [her male partner], so wow, I could actually enjoy this. You know, I'm still figuring it out, but whenever I do orgasm with my boyfriend, I start feeling guilty like I shouldn't be doing that. I'm like well, you know, if it's special, and then I'm like whatever, it feels good.

Melissa relied on her boyfriend to introduce her to her sexual needs, leaving little space to navigate her own sexual desires. Although she felt he paid attention to her pleasure, she still felt guilty when sex felt good and needed to justify wanting to have sex “because it was special.” Her emotional labor centered solely on his pleasure and she managed her sexual desire in alignment with that expectation. For women like Mary, an opportunity to construct their own sexual subjectivities became compromised in order to follow another’s rules and/or expectations of how one should feel, behave, or act sexually. Although her experience might appear to be two people exploring each other’s sexual desires together, it seemed as if the male partner (such as Mary and Melissa’s boyfriends) became the sexually authority because of the education men receive prior coming to college (i.e., wet dreams, ejaculation, male pleasure) and how they have been taught to be the one to initiate sexual activity (Fields, 2008). The process of emotional labor for women became evident in their anxiety about first-time sexual experiences, working to figure out the desires of their partners, and managing their behavior in order to maintain a man’s attraction.

Some participants admitted that they also agree to have sex with their male partners because they did not want to make him “feel bad” or risk ending the relationship. When asked what she enjoyed sexually, Isabelle, a straight, white 18-year-old from ULCC, admitted,

I guess . . . whatever, like what my boyfriend does. I don’t do anything to myself [masturbation] really, it’s usually just like, whatever he does, or what we do together. I’m not usually the one initiating it, like he’s the one that says, “Do you want to?” and I’m like the one that says yes or no. You feel bad if you say no.

Isabelle's emotional work stemmed from the negotiation of her sexual needs with her partner's, instead of acting upon what *she* desired. According to Isabelle, sexual pleasure meant what her and her boyfriend did together, and what *he* wanted to do and when. Despite her interest or desire, as a sexual gatekeeper she had been socialized to understand that it was up to her whether sexual activity happened and therefore needed to work to negotiate between what she wanted and what he desired. According to Lynn Phillips (2000), the "pleasing woman" is meant to wait for the man to act and to take the lead sexually. Here, Isabelle talked about maintaining a "pleasing" girl image at the expense of her own desires.

Women also performed emotional labor to establish themselves as more sexually experienced, especially in meeting the sexual needs of men. At times, women looked to more experienced friends as authorities to help them construct this knowledge. Elisa, a straight, white 20-year-old from CSU, talked about how she served as the "go-between" educator and authority among her male and female friends:

I hung out with the guys [in high school], and that is where I learned everything that I know about sex, like they would, you know, we would be hanging out, and they'd just start talking about it [sex]. I just sat there and just nodded and took everything in, but they would explain to me what they liked, what they didn't like, how to do this, how to do that, things to say to turn them on, like it was everything that a girl could possibly want to know. So then all the girls that they were interested in, or girls that were interested in them, they would come to me and find out what this guy liked and what that



guy didn't like, so I was like the "go-to" person because they didn't want to go and ask the guys.

Elisa, being seen as the "go-to" person among her female friends, understood her role as the sexual authority for other women because of the friendships she had established with her male friends. Through these conversations with her male friends, she also constructed her own sexual knowledge. For example, Elisa's understanding of sex was based upon what advice or insight her male friends shared with her, mainly centering on male sexual needs. Erin understood that, although sexual education experiences varied for both men and women, there was a larger social understanding that not only is men's sexuality privileged, but also that men's sexual knowledge is more expansive—and more important—than women's. Her friends sought Elisa out because of her connection with a more "experienced" authority and because they, like Melissa and Mary, were working to shape their sexual behaviors to align with male sexual needs.

Because in our society sex is seen as a male act that is aggressive and powerful, women saw themselves playing a smaller part in sexual relationships, where their sexual desires were deemed to be not as important and would therefore lead to unwanted or regretted sexual activities (Phillips, 2000). For example, women have been socialized to just "deal with male sexual aggressiveness" without recognizing the possibility of women being capable of, or willing to, enjoy sex. Women's emotional labor of having to navigate male aggressiveness disrupts their construction of sexual subjectivity and desire. For example, Marie, a straight, white 19-year-old from ULCC, talked about a drunken sexual encounter with a man in her residence hall, an incident she admitted that she could not fully remember:

We didn't have sex or anything, but pretty much did everything else, but um, I just deal with it. Like, it happened. Going to the [campus] police isn't going to do anything because, first of all, I have no proof that we had sex, and if he used a condom, there would be no proof that it was him. I just don't feel like dealing with it. I mean it happened, life goes on.

Marie dismissed the possibility that she had been sexually assaulted as part of the college experience, an incident that "just happened," or an act that she felt was her own fault because she had been drinking; she preferred to avoid confrontation and did not report the incident to the campus police. What is most problematic here is her assumption that reporting the act was not worth her effort. For example, Deborah Tolman (2002), in her research on young women and sex, argued that the phrase "it just happened" is an explanation "girls offer for why they have sex. "It just happened" can be understood as a cover story . . . a story that covers over active choice, agency and responsibility and serves to 'disappear' desire" (p. 2). In Marie's case, it did not serve to "disappear" desire, but it was a cover story that relieved her aggressor from having to accept responsibility for his behavior. Marie, being a "good girl," worked to uphold her role as a sexual gatekeeper.

Micah, a straight, African American from NU, also talked about a sexual experience with a man that she regretted afterwards:

It just didn't feel like . . . I didn't want it and I just felt like I was kinda forced, and it wasn't like a physical force but it was mental, and I remember walking away like, "It's not rape, but it just feels bad." You know what I mean? Because I consented to it."

Micah explained her experience in the context of being a sexual gatekeeper; she understood it was her responsibility to say no, and because she consented to having sex, she felt it was her fault for having feelings of regret later on. Both Micah and Marie participated in an encounter where they not only felt uncomfortable, but also where they did not feel control over their own sexual needs and/or decisions because of the choices they had made (i.e., consuming alcohol). Lynn Phillips (2000) explained that experiences such as these are unfortunately part of the fabric of the female experience; “‘everyday violence’ and insults to women’s hetero-relational autonomy are cast as normal because they are, unfortunately, so typical. As a consequence, “behaviors or interactions that are not clearly aberrant to men are taken as unproblematic or normal, even if the women experience them as oppressive or exploitative” (p. 67). Both Micah’s and Marie’s experiences, although problematic and dangerous, were more than just “something that happened”; they received powerful social messages about what it means for them to remain “good girls” and to manage their actions postencounter accordingly. The fact that Marie and Micah did not report these incidents reflected a larger issue about whom these women trust to report these incidents to and/or share their experiences with. Furthermore, not being able to talk about experiences freely affected the construction of their sexual subjectivity.

In order to spare male partners’ feelings, women ended up silencing their own subjectivity. Within this degrading and desire-voided framework, emotional labor for women was finding and opportunity to discover their own pleasures while making sense of male partners’ sexual desires. Women’s sexual desire tends to become silenced within these restrictions. The management of sexual desire ultimately affected women’s sexual decisions and

subjectivity, placing women within the role of a sexual gatekeeper in a heterosexist context while the privileging of male sexuality socially constructed their sexual desire. Within the focus group discussions, it was difficult for me to discern whether some women *wanted* to have sex and were hesitant in naming that desire to me, or if they were being led by male desire despite their resistance to having sex. Regardless, I found that how they talked about male sexuality and desire complicated women's decision-making and subjectivity in regulatory ways.

**“LUG,” Lesbian Until Graduation: Expectations of Lesbian and Bisexual Women and the Regulation of Their Sexual Subjectivities**

Through the discussions, I learned a new term in regard to lesbian and bisexual women; because of the assumption that everyone—in particular, women—sexually experiment in college, lesbian and bisexual women earned the label “Lesbians until Graduation,” the idea that women experiment with being a lesbian in college with the assumption that they will return to the normalized straight lifestyle upon graduation. This stereotype establishes being lesbian or bisexual as only a passing phase, not a valid sexual identity. I first heard about the “LUG” phrase from Johan, a 19-year-old lesbian from NU, who explained the phrase to me in an interview:

The myth for college lesbians is LUG, Lesbians Until Graduation . . . I guess a lot of girls do experiment in college, everyone experiments in college! But for some reason, it's [sexual experimentation] taken a lot less seriously when girls are like bi or bi-curious.

Johan understood that this social expectation, particularly within the college environment, framed her sexual identity more as a sexual *behavior* or *experiment* than as a component of her identity. This stereotype indicates that bisexual or lesbian women's sexual identity and pleasure

should not be recognized or validated because there is an expectation that they will “return” to being heterosexual. Therefore, women who identify as lesbian, queer, or bisexual have an additional layer of emotional labor in order to validate their sexual identity to others because of their positions as sexual minorities *and* as women (Friedman & Leaper, 2010).

Participants who identified as lesbian and/or bisexual spoke about how adults and peers alike policed the LGBT community and regulated the possibility of being a gay or lesbian person as a validated way of life within mainstream society. For example, Johan, a 19-year-old white lesbian from NU, talked about the early part of her high school experience:

I was pretty damn terrified about sex in general, because I couldn't identify until sophomore year, and I realized, this is me, I'm gay, I don't feel anything for these guys. There was a problem and a disjoint here, and I couldn't really work past that into any foreseeable future, like I couldn't imagine working that out in any way? It [being a lesbian] never occurred to me that could work for me, it didn't seem viable.

Johan, not yet realizing that being lesbian was a possibility for her, needed to manage her behaviors according to established social norms. Her “coming out” and sexual identification process was complicated due to outside social forces. Johan's sexual desire, therefore, was questioned by society and she not only needed to perform emotional labor to understand and make sense of her sexuality, but also to negotiate and resist dominant norms. Whether it was through the absence of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons' experiences within sexual education curricula in schools (and the overwhelming normative heterosexist discourse embedded within the curricula) or the hostile ignorance that these women faced from peers and faculty on their

college campuses, women sometimes found themselves up against a regulatory college environment. Beatrix, a 19-year-old white lesbian from NU, talked about her experience in college:

I would say one problem would be the fact that we [lesbians] are not visible, and therefore if I happen to accidentally out myself in class, I'm automatically tokenized. People assume with lesbians that there's just always a black and white, you know? You're either hypersexualized or you have no sexuality, you know? You're either butch, femme, slutty or a prude.

Beatrix felt that her sexual subjectivity was regulated based upon how others saw her as a lesbian, and she also understood her sexuality as silenced, or “not visible” on campus. Her understanding of what it meant to be a lesbian was limited by how others understood and described her identity within particular categories. What it meant to be a lesbian was already established by others for Beatrix, giving her very little space to construct an understanding of her identity. Beatrix's peers' assumptions reflected the hostile ignorance some of these women faced during their college experience. The hetero-normative environment of a college campus became a site of both negotiation and resistance for Beatrix, tokenizing her *because* of her sexuality and limiting the possibilities for her to be defined by other components of her subjectivity. Although she talked later on about college as a safe space, there were also spaces where she felt regulated and less agentic in expressing her sexuality.

Because of video exploits such as *Girls Gone Wild*, films that expose women who are positioned as straight but engage in kissing and other sexual behaviors with other women on

film, the concept of lesbian and bisexual sexual activities were also constructed as acts that are solely intended for the male gaze, not something that women would choose based upon *their own* sexual desire and/or pleasure. For example, Brooke, a 21-year-old bisexual, white woman from NU, spoke about her internship experience at an engineering firm:

When I was in the field, one guy looked at me and was like, “Oh, you’re in college, which *Girls Gone Wild* are you on? I’m like, yeah, because every single girl is on *Girls Gone Wild* [said with sarcasm]. And I was in a hard hat, boots, and a vest. And I was like, Do I look like I’d be on there? Is this what they want?

Brooke, frustrated by this hostile comment made in her workplace, believed that her intelligence and ability were insignificant to her coworkers. According to Brooke, her sexuality, no matter how she sexually identified, was what was of particular interest to the men who worked there. Although her coworker was not aware that Brooke identified as bisexual, to this man—and many others—bisexuality was not seen as a valid sexual choice or lifestyle, but rather a choice made by intoxicated college women on spring break who want to sexually turn on and please men, an image that affirms the centrality of male sexual desire. Her emotional work involved having to navigate these troubled waters as an intern in the workplace.

Brooke went on to talk about the influence of shows on MTV, like *Tia Tequila*, and the show’s portrayal of bisexual women.

Tia Tequila was this reality show on MTV, where it was a dating show like *The Bachelor*, except she [Tia] had a room full of women and men she had to choose between, you know, she did want a man, she did want a woman, and she was very

promiscuous, very sexual, got drunk all the time. So it [bisexuality] wasn't a very positive thing. So I know on campus, people talk about how there is sometimes a lot of sorority girls that make out with each other to get one of the frat boys and it's [bisexuality] is just kind of looked on negative, because people think it's just a way for people to get attention, and that it doesn't exist.

Brooke, describing how her sexuality was regulated among these media images, needed to work to understand her bisexuality as a viable identity and how it could be taken seriously by her peers. Her understanding of her sexual identity could not be easily separated from the influences of social media and how those images affected her peers' judgments. Brooke talked about how people understood her sexuality as something women did for fun, not as a valid identity. The level of emotional labor that lesbian and bisexual women performed was a significantly different experience than that of their heterosexual peers; not only did they have to work at figuring out their sexual identity, like Beatrix described above, but they also had to perform emotional labor to deal with how that sexuality is—or is not—presented to others and thereby negotiate others' reactions to their sexual identity. Furthermore, being “tokenized” as lesbians or bisexuals in the classroom, these women constantly had to explain their sexuality to others, further normalizing straight students and their experiences.

### **Women of Color: The Regulatory Images of the “Hypersexual” Woman**

The regulation of women of color within a dominant heterosexist framework also required a different level of emotional work in comparison to that of their white female peers. Women of color are expected to meet—and also to resist—sexual expectations that are set for



them. The good girl image will always be out of reach for them because women of color do not fit the dominant framework of what it means to be white and virginal; instead, they are hypersexualized through media, pop culture, and a long-standing racialized history. Women of color's bodies are regulated because of the ideological assumptions of hypersexuality, and therefore are seen more as objects, as opposed to sexual subjects with feelings, desires, and, at times, painful experiences. From women of color's conversations, I felt their sexuality was a topic to be taken up by others who attempted to interpret women's sexual choices, such as teachers, partners, and/or members of the dominant culture.

For example, being eroticized by the male gaze shaped women of color's perspectives and sexual subjectivities, in particular their bodies, where they were seen as something to be "evaluated, possessed or consumed by others" instead of active sexual subjects (Hirschman, Impett, & Schooler, 2006, p. 8). Some women admitted in the groups that they did not feel "womanly" without having "T&A" [tits and asses], as they developed ideas about their bodies and sexuality based upon men's validation and the male gaze. For example, Nicole, a 21-year-old, straight Dominican from NU talked about her struggle with appearing womanly and sexually attractive to men:

I've always been petite, like I don't have big boobs, I don't have a big butt, so I've always had a problem trying to fit an image of this like beauty. I didn't over-sexualize myself obviously to try to make myself, you know, I guess appealing to these men? But I've always had this battle within myself, like okay should I become sexually active because, um, I lack all these things, or should I stay within myself. And I just started

accepting myself, but after awhile, like I have friends with amazing bodies and we would go out together and the ones that would be, that all the guys would go, oh, “You, you, you,” and then I would be singled out because obviously I’m skinny and I have no butt.

Nicole struggled to negotiate her understanding of the ideal image of what it meant to be a woman of color with a curvier figure and “big boobs and a big butt” and how she perceived her own body. Nicole pondered becoming more sexually active in order to make up for her lack of curves or what she perceived would be sexually attractive to men. Therefore, Nicole worked to negotiate ways in which she could become more appealing, solidified by her experiences going out with her friends who had “amazing bodies” and struggled with aligning her behaviors with her looks. Nicole’s attempt in accepting herself was often interrupted by her assumptions of what women should look like physically and how they should present themselves sexually to men. Although Nicole talked about accepting herself, she still needed to push back against and negotiate the normalized and sexualized images of women of color.

Body parts, such as “booties” or lips that were referred to as “dick-sucking lips (DSLs)” by male peers, partners, and even strangers, were discussed within the context of the male gaze. Candy, a 21-year-old, straight African American from NU, talked about her experience with boys in high school commenting on her “DSLs,”

Guys would always talk about how much they wanted me to suck their dick. Like that is so degrading to me. So I was eroticized in that way, like I could not control my lips and I would hate it, and not want them as big as they were, and I hated them [lips]. And like it would piss me off, because if you look at me with my lip gloss poppin’, you want me to

suck your dick! It was really annoying. I never thought about this kind of stuff until now.

And I am like, wow, I was eroticized for my lips.

Candy understood that she was being eroticized because of how her body parts were attached to her identity as an African American woman; she ended up hating her lips because of how they were taken up and sexualized by others. Her anger impacted how she viewed her body and sexuality and complicated the ways in which she understood her sexual subjectivity. Candy's frustration also demonstrated ways in which she pushed back against the ways in which men eroticized her body, but she could not give way to anger until she understood *how* she was being eroticized.

There is also a socially constructed perception that women of color have more sex and enjoy it more than their white female peers. Expectations like these affirm the bad girl image for women of color and establish particular expectations and regulatory standards regarding how they made sexual decisions. Women of color, because of these assumptions, are considered to be deviant, feared, eroticized, and an *object* for white men to conquer. For example, Casey, a 20-year-old, straight African American from NU, talked about a white classmate of hers that had preconceived notions about the black race:

They [white men] just think we're exotic and we're like, you know some kind of temptress, I don't know why. Like this white boy in my high school, he told me that his parents would not let him watch any black people on TV unless it was porn. So . . . he couldn't watch any TV with black people unless they were in porn and so maybe that's like why they have seen a lot of minorities in porn and they think we're like, you know.

As a black woman, Casey understood that she exemplified an exotic and sexual figure to her classmate. She also had to make sense of how he related porn and hypersexuality to “minorities” and why that might shape his ideas of black people and sexuality. Casey’s understanding of the eroticization of black women complicated her understanding of herself as a sexual being; her narration of how others saw women that looked like her restricted the ways in which she wished to be sexual. Her classmate’s opinion had significant influence on how she saw herself as a black, sexually active woman. The degradation of only associating black people with pornographic movies limited the ways in which her peer viewed her, and Casey negotiated these perceptions in order to debunk them. In addition, Lindsay, a 22-year-old Latina from NU who did not identify a sexual orientation, talked about one partner who assumed she was “good in bed” due to her Puerto Rican ethnicity.

He’s like, “I just heard things about Puerto Rican girls,” and I was like, what? And he was like, “that they are really good in bed and they like to have sex,” and I’m like, are you trying to say that I’m a slut? And then he tried to get me to have a threesome and he was like, ‘Well, isn’t that what you Latinas do? I see it in porn so many times.

Lindsay understood that her partner believed women of color were expected to be promiscuous because of the media images perpetuated within the larger dominant society, images that categorized her sexuality in limiting ways. Although Lindsay needed to explain to her partner how *she* personally was as a sexual being, his ideas had already been prescribed by stereotypical perspectives. It seemed as if her idea of a hypersexual woman had also been influenced, demonstrated through her depiction of what a slut is as being “really good in bed.” Lindsay

framed her behavior within these stereotypes while at the same time expressing her anger and frustration against the social expectations that had been set. Some women of color also talked about men that had a sexual “checklist” of women they should have sex with, a woman of color being one of the items to be “checked off,” which hooks talked about as eroticizing “the Other” (1992). As Lindsey communicated in the focus group discussion, sex with women of color was considered a “novelty” for these men, but she admitted her struggle with this label: “I don’t want to be seen as, “Oh that girl that always has sex on her mind, oh she’s so dirty” ‘cause I feel like it’s [her sexuality] misunderstood a lot.” These racialized assumptions demoralize women’s sexuality and affect women of color’s overall sexual subjectivity. Latina and African American women, because of how their sexuality becomes regulated by ideological social norms, have a particularly difficult time. Women of color end up having to manage their behavior in resistance to these assumptions and make their sexual decisions based on how others view their sexuality.

Because race can define a woman sexually based upon these prescribed social norms, women of color had to do a particular kind of emotional work when it came to upholding a reputation within—and for—the family. Family dynamics were a large influence on women of color’s sexual decision-making; participants talked about how they felt responsible for maintaining the family’s reputation and needed to work to assure the family that their virginity remained intact; and if they did not remain virgins, they needed to ensure that their sexual behavior was maintained with sanctity and the consistent use of protection. For example, Sonia, an 18-year-old, straight African American woman from NU, talked about her decision to get on birth control before coming to college “because you know, stuff happens in college. The last

thing I want to do is to be pregnant because that would ruin everything that I stand for, it would ruin, you know, how far I got [in education].” Sonia continued, describing her father’s attitude in reference to her sexuality:

I feel like your parents don’t see you as a sexual being. When I told my own father that I wasn’t a virgin, he didn’t talk to me for like a month. And that was really hard for me.

And after he soaked it in, you know, got over it, he was like, you’re my baby girl, I didn’t like to think that. And I was like, “Daddy, I know, but I’m a human being!” I guess he felt that me not being a virgin meant that I was going to go crazy and be a porn star.

Sonia discussed her feeling controlled not just by her father’s standards in regard to her sexuality, but also by having to struggle to maintain the “baby girl” or good girl image for her family. As she said to her father, “I’m a human being!” Sonia was asking her father to recognize her as a sexual being, not just as his daughter. Her understanding of how her father worked to protect her exemplified her own work in separating herself independently from her family in order to validate herself not just as a “human being,” but also as an adult woman. Sonia also needed to work to manage her behavior so as to protect the family’s reputation by not getting pregnant or marring her own reputation.

On the other hand, women talked about having “hypersexualized” fathers, such as Vicky, a 21-year-old Dominican from NU who did not identify a sexual orientation. She expressed that talk about sex in the household centered upon how much her father needed, wanted, or desired sex, but never fully focused on her as a sexual being. Vicky stated:

I think my culture kind of embraces the man to be, not only the head of the household, but since he's the provider, you kind of have to deal with his shit. I know he has three mistresses, and [he's like] "Oh well, I get mine," that's how I see it.

Vicky's understanding of her father's sexuality influenced how she made sense of herself as a sexual *object* through the eyes of her father and how she understood what it meant to be a man within her culture. Dealing with her father's "shit" diminished her own sexual subjectivity and positioned him as a male that privileged his needs over that of women. According to Vicky, her father saw women as objects to be continually desired and sought after by men, which view, in turn, could lead fathers to exhibiting protective behavior, like Sonia's, by warning daughters about protecting themselves and/or holding off on sex until they had completed their education. Ultimately, like their white peers, women of color felt that their sexual subjectivity was compromised when it came to how others, particularly men, saw them as sexual beings, and a body to be regulated, shaped by society and media, and always available and validated by the male gaze. Women's emotional labor was portrayed through their explanations of how their sexuality is more than just prescribed social norms, thereby affirming themselves as sexual subjects to their peers and families.

### **Friends Policing Friends; the Power of Peers and the Regulation by Labels, Numbers, and Normalizing Sexual Behavior**

Within the focus groups, women admitted to me that they had volunteered to participate in this project so that they could hear from other women in order to validate their desires and activities as "normal." In fact, a study on college sexuality in 2009 found that fear of stigma and

rejection by peers constrained women's sexual behavior (Hamilton & Armstrong). I found that seeking validation (or affirmation), whether it was from past partners or from their peers, was part of the work that women did in order to move themselves through the process of sexual decision-making; they leaned heavily on the act of policing themselves or others in order to stay within various boundaries that had been set within peer groups. Affirmation from others was often necessary for women, no matter their sexual experiences, to feel sexually pleased; if they felt accepted by others for their sexual decision-making, it made having sex permissible for women in order to maintain a good girl image. Throughout the discussions and interviews, women consistently asked me, themselves, and others in the group particular questions that required some sort of affirmation from the other party, "Am I feeling justified for my behaviors?" "Am I normal?" or "Am I doing this [sex] right?" Basing their decisions upon the judgment of other people and asking these questions of each other showed that a certain amount of work was required for women to feel justified about the decisions they had made, or to feel that their good girl image remained intact. Although they defined what it means to be a good girl differently, participants used focus groups as an opportunity to explore and learn about how others measured their sexuality against a "bad" or good girl image.

Socially defined labels, like "whore," a label that is produced from the good girl/bad girl social discourse, regulated women's sexual decision-making and was used to police others. Women—and men—"police" each other based upon the social discourses that they learn early on in their educational experiences, especially the regulation of women's sexual activities (Tannenbaum, 2000). I utilize the term "police" as a way to describe how peers measured each



other's actions through socially established labels and ways to define sexuality as deviant; in other words, to police means to maintain social norms and discourse, or what it means to be "normal." Some women wished to act upon their sexual desires, but at the same time, they performed emotional labor to avoid labels with a negative connotation. For example, Dara, a 20-year-old white, straight woman from CSU, described how she discussed her sexual past with a sexual partner:

I caught myself explaining to him right off the bat, "Well, you're probably going to hear from these people that I'm a whore, but this is what happened, and I made mistakes," and somehow, like you're still judged by those mistakes. Let's say you failed a couple of classes, you know what I mean? People wouldn't be going "ohmigod, she's real stupid." But somehow when you make mistakes [she is referring to sleeping with someone who is not your boyfriend] you're stuck with it. . . Everything else about women can be erased, until they are exclusively defined by their sexuality.

Dara described how she felt her sexual activity and decisions were policed by her peers, and therefore she needed to explain her actions—or what she referred to as "mistakes—to others, managing her sexuality in reaction to her fear of being labeled. Despite the sexual revolution, the pill, and three decades of feminism, women, like Dara, continue to be defined by their sexuality (Diamond, 2008; Tannenbaum, 2000).

Based upon the need for justification and normalizing of their behaviors, I heard women in the groups talking about their need to control and manage their sexuality in relation to how they understand how others care—or do not care—about their own sexual experiences. Nicole, a

21-year-old Dominican from NU, talked about the emotional process of her sexual decision-making,

Sometimes I wish that I could be one of those people that could just like do things and not really care about them. I don't obviously want to be like that, but sometimes I think that it would make things easier because I think about things so much, I care about things too much. And I let things sit in and just kind of take over me sometimes, which is really bad.

Here, Nicole is not just talking about herself, but also narrating how she understood others' decision-making, peers that she assumed had more sex than she did. Nicole's opinion and view of how others participate in sexual activity was demonstrated through her understanding that they are less thoughtful and reflective than she is, or that they do not spend as much time or do as much emotional work on their sexual decision-making. Therefore, in order for Nicole to remain a "good girl," she needed to ensure that she continues to care about things "too much." At the same time, she wished that she were like others who seemed to not care. Like Nicole, women had a range of ways of measuring themselves against others, understanding what it meant to be a good girl and the larger social forces that dictate what is "normal" or "accepted."

According to participants, women utilized labels such as "slut" and "whore" as tools to police other women and normalize their own sexual behaviors. Women strived to be "good girls" because social expectations influenced them to think that they should always need to apologize for bad behavior and sexual decisions (framed as "mistakes" by some women) based upon the good girl criteria. Therefore, the desire to be a good girl overrode their desire to be a "bad" one.

Definitions of what a slut was varied within the groups. “Sluts,” according to some women, were women who needed too much attention; being a slut had nothing to do with how much sex women had or their number of sexual partners, but rather how women saw other women “flaunting” their sexuality as a way to be recognized and affirmed by a larger public audience. Some of the participants agreed that, “‘empty sex’ [sex without emotion] would be slutty sex.” According to these women, “empty sex” was therefore void of emotion and/or intention; it did not fit into what it means to make a good girl decision about sex. Being a “slut,” therefore, meant being a woman who did not desire a relationship, and instead felt the need for control over a sexual relationship and the need for male attention. For other women, a slut was someone who had sex “just because” or a “girl who needed way too much attention.” To these women, being a slut was also someone who wanted to fulfill their *physical* sexual desires, not necessarily their “*emotional*” desires.

Ideas of what it means to be a slut are shaped by the larger society, as Micah, a 30-year-old, straight African American from NU, explained: “I don’t really have a personal definition of a slut. I think it’s pretty much how society sees everything, I automatically think, okay that’s what a slut is.” Therefore, according to these defined labels, women who are “good girls” keep quiet about their sexuality and instead work to manage their desires in order to avoid these labels. Avoiding *and* maintaining the structure and power of labels was complicated work for women. Where is the pleasure for women in these decisions when they are consistently trying to hide themselves as healthy sexual beings? Sexual pleasure therefore becomes complex because

of how it is informed by social norms and regulatory ideas and how others perceive and police sexual behavior.

Based upon the participants' definitions of slut, women who opened themselves up sexually—that is, made their sexuality and behaviors public—provided the space for others to judge them. On the other hand, if women were “quiet” about their sexuality, or did not necessarily fulfill their desires, they were able to manage their sexuality, avoid labels, and remain “good girls,” but did not necessarily exercise their sexual subjectivity. Michelle, a 38-year-old, straight African American woman from ULCC, discussed how sexual subjectivity in society is never private, yet can be up for public contestation and social debate,

Especially us as women, we're, you know, judgment from others kind of puts us in a box or a label of what it is that we can do or have to be, and it's hard. Because we have these roles where this is, this is the role that you take on if you're going to function in society, but if you don't adhere to this role, than you're kind of, it's like “ech!” you know?

Michelle explained that because of society's labeling, women need to adhere to their role in order to be acceptable or function in society. She understood that there is little room for her to expand her sexual subjectivity when there are already labels and categories established that regulate her sexuality in particular ways. Michelle's understanding became complicated as it was difficult for her to discern who exactly has the power when it comes to her engaging with her sexual agency. She needed to work to negotiate what role might fit within how she sees herself sexually and the role that society asks her to take on. Women managed their sexual desire in order to avoid judgment by parents, friends, and partners and to avoid labels that are connected

with sexual promiscuity (i.e., “slut” or “whore”). Nicole, a 21-year-old straight Dominican from NU, lamented further about her sexual experiences,

I just didn’t want people to know my business because they would judge me. And that’s why it hurt me the first time when I lost my virginity that everybody that knew, like I didn’t want people to know! And then I had a boyfriend a few months after that, and that was the guy who kind of broke up with me right after [they had sex]. So, I guess I’ve never really had good experiences with having sex. You know what? Sex isn’t really that great because it leaves me feeling like shit.

How Nicole narrated her understanding of other people’s assumptions about her having sex regulated her decision-making. Sex was not pleasurable for her because of her anxiety about how others would judge her, not because of the intimacy she may have felt with her partner or how she might enjoy sex. She expressed that her experience was a negative one because the relationship had ended; therefore, she regretted having sex because of how she allowed for others to make her “feel like shit.” Nicole’s sexual decision-making was not without some level of emotional work due to her anxiety about other’s perceptions and how she attempted to align those perceptions with how she viewed her sexual experiences. As Heldman and Wade (2010) argue, women tend to show regret after sexual experiences because they are socialized to believe that sex outside a relationship is morally wrong, not necessarily because they do not desire to have sex initially. Nicole’s work was caught up within her attempt to uphold an assigned social role.

For example, Sonia, a straight, African American 18-year-old from NU, compared her experience sharing information on her sexual experiences with her best friend versus her other friends:

It's easy to talk about sex with my best friend, 'cause we're so alike, and we're just really liberal people. But there's stuff you can't really talk about with friends because out of fear of judgment; I feel like people judge you, but you know they do the same thing behind closed doors, or do have the same thoughts and desires, but they just don't want to voice it because they're afraid of being judged.

Judgment of and by others was a component of emotional work. Sonia viewed her friends as hypocritical because of how they judged her sexual behavior; however her assumption that "they do the same thing behind closed doors" was also Sonia's way of policing their actions, utilizing her sexual experience as a measuring stick to compare her decisions to her friends' decisions. Sonia's—and her friends'—policing was a form of emotional work, as they tried to avoid judgment from all angles. Another form of emotional labor was Sonia's act of separating her friends into particular categories based upon who would judge her sexual actions and who would reserve their judgment. In essence, Sonia policed her talk of sexual behaviors and activities to avoid experiencing anxiety over what others would think of her sexual decisions.

Women performed emotional work when it came to either policing others or avoiding judgments by peers. Some of their work involved ensuring that they chose friends that would not judge them for sexual behaviors, as well as choosing friends that might be able to provide some advice and guidance based upon their past experiences. Regardless, women policed their peers in

order to ensure that others, and especially themselves, kept in accord with the rules of what it means to be a “good girl.” Once women were labeled otherwise, everything else about their identity (their role as a student, daughter, sister, etc.) was rendered invisible. Eva, a straight, white 19-year-old from CSU, explained how she dealt with the aftermath of sexual decisions she made in college and her peers’ reactions to those decisions,

Here I was recreating who I was and yet it was awful because I was just the girl that was easy, you know? Like, forget anything else about me. I like to think that I’m a decent person at least . . . somebody that is really trying to do a lot of great things for the world, but nobody cared about all that, they just cared that I was supposedly easy, you know? I just wanted to run away, start over and get the hell out of CSU because everybody had these misperceptions of me and the only thing that got me through was knowing that those were misperceptions were not true, that it wasn’t me.

Eva understood, based upon her peers’ reactions, that no longer was her identity about possessing a myriad of “subidentities,” but just one very important one: her sexual identity. Her decision to have sex with a number of men when she came to college destroyed the opportunity for her peers to see the other components of her identity; therefore, her work was about trying to disengage from these misconceptions, and “recreate” her identity beyond how she made sexual decisions. She even considered leaving the school and starting over somewhere else where she could be accepted for who she was beyond her sexual behaviors. Like Eva, women understood the labels and judgments that regulated their sexual subjectivity, yet often were challenged in reconciling this policing in order to be accepted by their peers.

## Conclusion

This chapter interrogated the how women participants talked about sex as complicated work within the context of a dominant ideological society. The regulation of women's sexuality complicated the process of how women came to make sexual decisions and seek out "authorities" that they believed would be able to provide more comprehensive information on sex. According to the participants, sex was not just about sexual pleasure, but also represented the work women did to exercise agency, independence, and to work through larger anxieties *outside* of their sexual decision-making, such as how they saw their roles in family and peer networks or within the college environment. Despite the prevalence in society of women being portrayed as sexual objects (such as music videos and television ads) the sexual subjectivity of the female is still in question; whether it involves women discovering their own pleasure, coming to orgasm, or identifying what they want in a sexual relationship, women's sexual exploration ends up becoming emotional labor as they work to manage their behavior in alignment with regulatory standards defining the good girl and bad girl. Therefore, being a good girl for these women often meant having to sacrifice their sexual agency so as to spare their partner's feelings (particularly male partners'), please their parents, and satisfy their friends' judgments, thus avoiding labels such as "slut" and "whore" and protecting their sexual reputation. The consistent policing of women's sexual behaviors interrupts the construction of their sexual subjectivity, thereby making it difficult for women to discern what they truly desire from sex, their sexual partners, and themselves as sexual beings.



When women's sexuality is regulated in these ways, their sexuality becomes more about how others can benefit *from* their sexual behavior, rather than how women can benefit and become more active sexual agents. For example, the rape culture perpetrated by pornographic images and different forms of media is nurtured by educational curricula and society in general—a society that privileges male sexuality and pleasure and that ignores or subordinates female sexual pleasure. Phillips (2000) argues that “women's bodies are not sites of *active* desire, but rather *objects* to be desired and kept under control (p. 40). Women's negotiation of and resistance to their sexual desires within a dominant ideological framework became the crux of their emotional work. It is what shaped the continued conversations in the next two chapters.

## CHAPTER 5. NEGOTIATING SEXUAL DESIRE AND THE POWER OF SEXUAL AUTHORITY

I was just thinking about sex, I mean, obviously sex is still policed socially, but why . . . why is it something that matters when other things don't? I was trying to break it down, like if sex is something just for procreation but we're not actually in it for procreation anymore and we're in it for pleasure, than why isn't it just pleasure and why isn't that the end of it? Why are there all these rules? Or why am I making up all these rules that don't exist?

Like, I have slept with two people, so I know that's okay and that's normal, but I don't know. I don't know what to do with myself. I set these ideals for myself, so I want to, like sex is a vulnerable thing and I don't want to be vulnerable with someone I don't trust, that I'm not attracted to in an emotional sense as well as a physical sense, like on every level I feel like it should be something that means something, but now I don't know if it's supposed to mean something! So I've set these ideals, like, Oh you should be in love with them or whatever, but why? And if I don't act according to that, does that change my ideals? Does that make me a hypocrite?

—Johan, a 19-year-old, white lesbian from NU

Those few moments of Johan struggling to put her conflicted feelings into words serves as a strong representation of my argument within this chapter; the emotional labor of women negotiating between managing sexual desires and being “the good girl” is complicated and comes into tension with women's sexual subjectivity. Women engaged in emotional labor when

they negotiated between these two tensions: aligning their desires and feelings with what they perceived as “normal,” while at the same time, questioning how this “normal” is socially constructed. For example, Johan utilized her interview as an opportunity to think out loud about her sexual desire in relation to her sexual identity. Here, Johan was trying to frame the act of sex as a topic that is not as taboo as society has established it to be, while also aligning her sexuality with dominant social rules and norms. She understood that if a woman is “too willing” or desires to have sex, she is labeled a slut and her agency therefore becomes compromised because of the judgment of others. However, she also believed that because particular social rules on sexual activity have changed and become more lenient and progressive, her sexual desires should also come into agreement with these newly established rules. As Johan argued about what’s “normal” and that sex “should mean something,” she drew upon social expectations and regulatory discourse on what makes sexual activity acceptable, while at the same time she questioned the ideals she had set for herself relative to her sexuality. For example, Johan’s measuring stick for “normal” was based on numbers; by having slept with two people, Johan placed herself squarely in the range of normal, having a clear picture of what “normal” looks like. Yet, she still questioned her decisions in her talk. Like Johan, many women asked themselves—and me—in this study, What’s normal? How do women negotiate and “measure” what it means to be “normal,” whether it is by numbers or by one’s behavior? These questions exemplified the kind of emotional labor women undertake.

This chapter on negotiation of women’s sexuality and sexual desire addresses how women negotiated the world they live in varied ways, using their understanding of how their

sexuality was regulated in order to manage particular components of their decision-making. Engaging with, revising, and understanding social norms and discourse is all part of women's negotiation. Each section engages a different kind of space for this negotiation, demonstrating how it shaped women's sexual subjectivity and illuminated their understanding of (a) parental expectations of sexuality and conversations within the home, (b) college as a site of negotiated sexual experimentation, (c) the nuances between the privileging of male desire and the desire for an emotional connection, and (d) being policed by peers and affirmation of the good girl image. All of these acts of negotiation continued to build upon women's sexual subjectivity, or how they experienced themselves as a sexual being, a person that makes *active* sexual choices and feels entitled to sexual desire and safety.

Johan later commented that sex and sexual education is "full of contradictions." For example, Johan states:

I've come to this crisis where I'm like, What does it matter, like how do I change where the number of people that I sleep with, or like you know, kiss or snuggle with, how does that change who I am?

When Johan said this in our interview together, I sat upright in my chair. For what she said was powerful and the primary reason why I was doing this research. Because *why does* it matter? And how do women negotiate the tension between "what matters" and the power of needing to feel accepted among their family, friends, and peers? I found that the negotiation of these contradictions was a primary component of women's emotional work and the crux of how sexual subjectivity is demonstrated through women's work.

I found that women's overall curiosity about sex and their sexual desire were indeed present in their talk, yet it became hidden among their work of negotiation or of figuring out their sexual pleasure and whom they should turn to for expert advice on sex and sexuality, what I refer to as an "authority." As discussed in the previous chapter, women are regulated by those individuals whom the dominant culture positions as "authorities" on sex, such as teachers or parents, who can be regulatory when it came to teaching and talking to women about sex. Women asked in varying ways for further broadening of what they already knew about sex; therefore, what they needed in—and from—an authority varied. For example, women talked about what information they learned from their parents, explained its limitations and then looked to peers for more information. Therefore, messages could become complicated as peer and parent views were often framed in a different context and with different details; women needed to work to negotiate this information and then apply it to their subjectivity. In this study, I found that a component of women's emotional labor involved seeking out an authority they could trust, who would not pass judgment and/or who had had more sexual experience. Figuring out who was a "sexual authority" was an important piece of women's emotional labor because identifying an authority was connected to how they understood and negotiated their sexuality. For example, Micah, a 30-year-old, straight African American woman from NU, talked about her negotiation of sexuality in how she identified a sexual authority:

I think as females it's hard because we don't know our bodies and it's because our parents didn't tell us [about sexual desire], because you know, they're trying to protect us and their parents didn't tell them and so on and so forth; and then you have a period and

“Let me show you how to use a pad and a tampon,” and that’s it. So you don’t really even know as far as learning from someone maternal to you what it means to be a woman. You like learn that from men, really, you know, their perception of what it is to be a woman. And so I think that’s hard, so groups like this [focus group] are nice ‘cause you learn and you can hear from other females. So I think you grow up, I think you learn from your peers and other people, but you don’t really learn from your household for the most part, for most women, you know.

Here Micah is working to understand who the “authority” on sex was for her. Was it her parents who talked to her about her period and how to protect herself, or her partner who allowed her to explore sexual desires? Micah depended upon authority figures to understand what being a “woman” meant, and her work involved negotiating their definitions to align them with her own. The focus group provided space for her to listen to others and work through this process through hearing *and* talking. Part of the emotional labor process for women was to figure out who their “authority” on sex should be and how that authority might broaden the scope of their understanding of sex and sexual subjectivity.

As discussed earlier, emotional work involves the overall management of female sexual desire and emotion. How does this management of desire affect women’s sexual decision-making and negotiation of discourse? How does this emotional labor connect to sexual gatekeeping and women being educated to say no instead of being educated on what it means to say yes? The content and process of the participants’ talk was an exercise in negotiation. I heard them talk themselves through their own desires, thoughts, and decisions and how they saw

themselves in high school (and now as college students). They asked each other questions throughout the discussions, always validating, always curious, always with their past experiences in mind, and all the while negotiating social expectations while trying to define their sexual subjectivities. Women's emotional work emerged from the questions that they asked themselves, such as, "Am I normal"? "Am I doing this [sex] right"? The very talking about the topic of sex with me—and my research legitimating it as a subject to be interrogated—provided them the agency to more openly negotiate their sexuality. To be sexually subjective would mean that one would have to talk about it. I found that although curiosity and desire were part of their discourse, it was hidden among their labor of negotiation. This chapter exposes their negotiation in more detailed ways. It looks at how they came to think about their sexual subjectivity—and how it is shaped—in tension with social regulations, in the context of the family and their relationships with partners and peers.

### **Creating Conversational Space: Negotiated and "Open" Conversations on Sex**

#### **Within the Home**

As discussed in the previous chapter on regulated talk within the home, women talked about how parents set limits for their daughters, and how women negotiated those limits and expectations; I focused on how women managed their behaviors in sexual talk and how they made sense of these conversations. In this chapter, I point to the ways in which women worked to create conversational space in the home and how they talked about and negotiated "open" talk between themselves and their parents. When some women talked about how "open" their parents were in talking about sex, the meanings of "being open" varied. In a study on communication

within the family, researchers found that when family members describe communication as “open,” they often base it “on an assumption of the significance of subjective meaning in communication and relationships” and that “openness is an attitude of mind in family communication” and one that takes emotional work and effort (Kirkman, et al., 2005, pp. 49, 63.). No matter what the communication looked like, it was work that depended upon the context of the relationships, the level of comfort of both parents and daughters, and values that were engrained within the framework of familial life.

Women defined being “open” in various ways, whether it was based upon how their parents approached the topic of sex, talked about birth control, acknowledged their sexuality, etc. Some parents talked about only birth control or protection when it came to sexual activity, while other parents spoke more to the emotional impact sex could have upon their daughters. Therefore, I organize this section around the kind of talk women wanted and how some women had more difficulty than others in creating space to engage in talk about sex. For example, if they felt talk was too regulated, they worked to find an authority that they would be able to turn to as someone they could be more open with.

Reading the data over again, the power that adults (teachers and parents) possess in choosing what they do and do not reveal to their children about sex became clear to me. Parents often made “heavy use of warnings,” about sex, and their expectations regarding the sexual conduct of men and women were based upon a dominant heterosexist network (Smiler, et al., 2005, p. 43). For example, Penelope, a straight, white 20-year-old from CSU, talked about how her parents and adult figures in her life talked to her about sex:



They only told you as much as they think that you should know about sex, and if you tell them that you already know all about sex, they think that they are “off the hook” to talk to you more about it.

Penelope recognized that it was also work for her parents to address the issue of sexuality with their children, yet she still identified her parents as authorities on the matter. However, she went on to express her insight about how talking about sex with youth is restricted by adults and how the details of sex are “kept secret” from their children:

It seems the more that you know about sex, the more people are willing to talk to you about sex. So when you’re a little child and you don’t know anything about sex, everyone’s always like, “Oh well, you know, when two people love each other very much, and one day they have a baby, the end.” Then you know, you’re in elementary school, middle school age, so your friends have talked about it, you know that something called sex exists and so they [adult figures] become “authority figures” like “Okay, so this is what sex actually is,” and so you sort of guess from there, and then you get into high school, and people actually start experimenting and talking about it more, so then adults are like, “Okay, so real sex education like, this is what sex is and these are all the bad things that happen if you ever have sex.”

Your parents aren’t really comfortable talking with you about sex until they think you already know. Most of the time when they have that talk it’s because they think you know already and they want to make sure that you know the right things, but then as soon as you say, “Yeah, yeah, I know” and they’re like, “Okay, then I’m done, I don’t have to

teach you everything, you already know it.” And you really don’t of course, because they just, everyone won’t tell you anything that you don’t already know, and I don’t really understand why there’s this, like “This is secret, let’s keep it for ourselves or something.”

Penelope recognized the power that adults have in regulating what information does and does not get shared with youth in regard to sex. I found this to be a thoughtful explanation of how Penelope understood what it meant to have the power to distribute particular information, how one becomes an “authority” on sex and how that information must be negotiated by young women. Adult “power” is about how society situates parents as authorities. For instance, the dominant ideological discourse of adolescent sexuality as a “psychological, medical and familial drama in which teen sexual urges are overpowering and difficult to control” prioritizes the rights of parents—as well as other authority figures—as gatekeepers to their children’s knowledge, controlling what information gets told and what gets withheld and establishing particular authoritative power (di Mauro & Joffe, in Herdt, 2009, p. 75). Penelope’s work was figuring out how this information gets passed on from educator to parent to child. She understood that no one seemed comfortable about broaching the topic with children, and the power to disseminate information somehow became lost in the translation and negotiation of regulating information about sex.

At some point during their time living at home, women felt that they needed to “face” the conversation with one of their parents, and participants talked about their discomfort attached to having that conversation. In attempting to broach the conversation of sexuality with their parents, women needed to reveal themselves to their family as sexual beings. Revealing this aspect of

their identity was emotional work for women; they worked to either hide their sexual behaviors and/or identity from their parents or find a way in which to reveal their sexual identity at the right time or moment as a way to introduce herself as a sexual being. For example, Kirsten, a 19-year-old, white bisexual from CSU, talked about how she came out to her mother:

It was not fun. I was driving home last year and was with my mom in the car for four hours and the subject came up. I was living with two other girls at the time who were lesbian and my mom is like, “You’re not like that, are you?” and I’m like, “Um, this is going to be a long car ride, can we pull over?” It’s difficult with your parents.

Kirsten knew that the conversation with her mother was going to be difficult because she had to figure out how to explain it to her without causing an issue. Although her mother did not specifically initiate the conversation, she did try to direct it. As in Kirsten’s case, it was common for women to work to provide space for the conversation; some women therefore needed to broach the subject first with their families if it was to be addressed at all; at the same time they had to negotiate what information to reveal—or not reveal—about their sexual lives. For example, Nicole, a 21-year-old, straight Dominican from NU, talked about the discomfort her mother had in broaching the topic with her:

I feel like she still lives in denial and she’s still like, I don’t know, she just does not talk about it. But she knows it’s happening and sometimes I want to bring it up to her, but I kind of want her to be the first one to bring it up, because I don’t want it to come out of nowhere.

Nicole struggled in deciding whether to bring up the topic of sex—and the fact that she was sexually active—to her mother—mostly because she was afraid of either being judged or discounted by her. It was important to women, regardless if the topic was brought up within the home or not, to be accepted by their parents as sexual beings and to have the ability to ask questions and not be criticized or ostracized for doing so. Participants often assumed the worst when it came to talking about sex with parents.

Tara, a straight, white 19-year-old from CSU, talked about how her mom spoke differently to her about sex. Tara said the talk was “really biology based”:

She explained what it was, the body parts, she had a diagram where she tried to draw like a uterus, whatever, and she talked about the menstrual cycle and stuff like that with me, but she definitely didn’t talk about the emotional part of it all, and she didn’t even tell me that it felt good, or that it was something people enjoyed or wanted to do. She just said that it was for the purpose of making babies. I’ve always felt like there is always a serious consequence [with sex] and so you should only have sex with someone that you can see yourself being able to have a relationship with, someone you can deal with the consequences with.

In her understanding of what sex should be about, who it should be with, and the consequences attached to that decision, Tara was influenced by her mother. Tara’s approach to sex was situated within a context of negative consequences; the possibility of her having sexual pleasure was not explored in conversations with her mother. Tara’s view of what it would be like to have sex with

someone was shaped by how her mother communicated to her about when—and how—it would be appropriate to have sex.

In contrast to Tara's experience, other women shared with me that talking about sex with their parents was an open and warm experience, where they felt that their sexual subjectivity was supported within the home. To these women being "open" meant discourse that included acceptance, lack of judgment, and a space where questions could get answered. Maureen, a straight, white 19-year-old from CSU said:

Both of my parents are doctors, so it's always like very straightforward. They've always talked about everything, they introduced me to what sex is, what it entails, how babies are made, like what a period is. I mean, from a very early age, I think I started to learn stuff because I had an aunt that was a lesbian, and so as a kid, I was like "Why does Aunt Peggy come with Pine every year? And they have a little girl?" And so my mom had to like explain like the whole thing, like Pine's brother donated the sperm to my aunt.

Maureen understood discourse in the home as open because of her parent's profession, yet she still explained their talk as biologically-based and void of particular emotional and more intimate details. Maureen's idea of openness did not necessarily need to include emotional aspects of a sexual relationship. Even though there was a discussion about her aunt being a lesbian, her understanding of that relationship did not necessarily include what it meant to be queer, a lesbian, or bisexual within the dominant heterosexist society. Yet Maureen believed that how she learned about sex was more inclusive than what she had learned in the classroom. Carla, a straight, white 21-year-old from CSU, also believed that her parents shaped how she made sexual

decisions through their support and open communication with her. Although she became pregnant her sophomore year, she was able to turn to her parents for support and guidance.

When my mom found out I was pregnant, she drove up to college the same day and we talked about everything, talked about the options, and they are the best parents anyone can ever ask for. Like, they would support you in any decision you made. I'm always like, "Mom, what would you do in this situation," and it's amazing because I always took it for granted until like these discussions [focus] groups started, and I was like, "Wow, not everyone's parents actually talk to them about that kind of stuff," which is weird for me.

To Carla, her parents standing by her and supporting her sexual decisions meant they were being supportive and open. Although she understood that she still had to make her own decisions, Carla appreciated her mother providing her the space in which to do so. Hearing how other women in the focus group talked about their own parents and how talk was regulated in their homes, Carla expressed later on how fortunate she was to have parents she could turn to when a consequence arose from a sexual decision she made. Penelope from CSU also described her relationship with her mother as a positive and "open" one:

That's the sort of open environment that she gave us . . . you know when I had my first boyfriend she said, "Go and get on birth control right now," and I said "But we're not having sex, Mom, I'm 15," and she said, "Doesn't matter, get on birth control right now, you have a boyfriend." That was always her theory, you know, "I'm going to make you safe about it, and then you can do whatever you want," and as long as she knew her

children were going to experiment with sex and drinking, then it should be under “her roof” when it happens.

Penelope understood her mother as being first and foremost concerned with her daughter being safe. To Penelope, “open” meant that her mother was comfortable enough simply to *realize and recognize* that she was having sex and that her mother provided her permission to do so, but yet was not open enough to talking about what sex actually entailed. Penelope’s emotional labor involved negotiating her parents’ information and aligning it with how she made sexual decisions.

Studies show that because mothers provide more information about sex than fathers, open discourse in the household was understood as something that happened between mothers and daughters only (Solebello & Elliott, 2011). However, participants did talk about what it meant for them to talk about sex with their fathers. Melissa, a white, straight 19-year-old from ULCC stated:

My dad never really said anything to me because it was my mom’s job, you know, my mom’s a social worker, she kind of deals with problems like that all the time, so I guess he assumes she’ll take over.

To Melissa, not only did she see her mother as more of the expert and authority on sexual education, but she also believed her father thought that talking about sex with his daughter was seen as “someone else’s job,” not necessarily as an opportunity to be open and supportive. Carla from CSU also shared, “I felt like I could sit down and talk to my mom, but my dad would get a little freaked out about it.” When fathers *were* open in talking about sex, their talk was typically

delivered in the context of having their daughters get on birth control and/or protecting themselves from male aggression, as discussed in the last chapter. Fathers sometimes relied on their own experiences and feelings as sexually aggressive young men, and therefore felt protective of their daughters because of this firsthand knowledge; accordingly, they positioned their daughters as passive and vulnerable rather than as sexual agents (Elliott, 2012). Participants did admit that, although fathers were uncomfortable approaching the topic, some fathers were more open than others. For example, Nicole, a 21-year-old, straight Dominican from NU, explained that her father, not her mother, brought up the topic of sex, but only within the context of sexual protection and consequences:

Like he was the one that kind of spoke about it. Like the other day, he left me a message, “Oh be careful, wear condoms!” blah, blah, blah because he found out that I had a boyfriend. So I was like, “Okay!” He’s like, “Oh, make sure you’re protected, you know you’re still really young, I don’t want you to become pregnant.” But I guess it’s because I have a boyfriend now, so he’s just like “Okay, be careful.”

Nicole’s father’s recognition of her being a sexual subject was only because she was in a serious relationship; therefore, it was assumed she was having sex. She talked about her father’s responsibility as protecting her from any consequence that may stem from her relationship. Women believed that fathers understood their job of addressing the topic of sex with their daughters as a way to ensure that they were using protection and to leave the explanation of the more intimate and emotional details to the mothers. Fathers were therefore able to ignore the reality of their daughters as sexual subjects and instead attach their daughter’s sexuality to the



more clinical and less emotional aspect of sex by suggesting that they “get on the pill” without any explanation about what it means to be sexually active. Some participants explained that, although there had been conversations about sex with their parents, there was no explanation of exactly why college was assumed to be a place for sexual exploration or why college was a perceived site for women to become sexually active. Although both mothers and fathers *did* talk to their daughters, some women often felt that the conversations were limited to safety and not necessarily to details, in particular, the emotional aspects of sex. As Tara, a white, straight, 19-year-old from CSU, expressed, “I wish someone told me about the emotional parts of sex, like when you have sex with someone it changes everything, and when you’re young, you really don’t know what you are doing.” Looking back on her own sexual experiences, Tara worked to negotiate what she had already experienced and what she would have liked to know prior to those experiences. Although women desired talk within the home, some were more uncomfortable than others about asking for specific information from parents, assuming that their parents did not want to talk about sex with them.

When talk of sex was regulated or altogether dismissed in the home, women took it upon themselves to either negotiate those messages and/or find alternative ways to fill in what they felt they were missing regarding the positive aspects of sex and sexual pleasure. Therefore, women needed to negotiate “authority” when it came to talking about sex with families and peers. Because of the lack of talk at home, women often relied on more experienced peers and partners to educate them on the nuances of sex and sexual desire. For example, Beatrix, a 19-year-old, white lesbian from NU, talked about her friends teaching her about the “bigger picture” of sex:

“They sat me down; they explained to me everything that I could ever need to know, and you know, gave me the big picture. And I didn’t officially learn until last year [freshman year of college].” In order to understand her sexual subjectivity, and to confirm her identity as viable and real, Beatrix turned to partners and/or friends to make her feel comfortable within her sexual skin, negotiating between what parents did not discuss at home and what details her friends shared with her. Beatrix’s description of the “big picture” included details such as what it is like to have sex, and different sexual positions, behaviors, etc. Those women who had older sisters talked about how their sisters became authorities on sex because they were able to learn from their sisters’ experiences, ask questions, and observe their behaviors. For these women, sisters acted almost as “stand-in” educators who were able to talk about sex more freely than the parents, and who had the ability to impart and pass along sexual knowledge that they knew their younger sisters had yet to acquire. For example, Dara, a white, straight 20-year-old from CSU, explained how she learned about sex:

I got it [sex education] really early on because my sister, every time she’d find out about it, I found out about it; she was five years older than me, and so I learned about basically all the details, not just anatomical things.

Dara relied on her sister as the authority on sex not only because she was older, but because she also saw her sister as having more experience. Sonia also used dialogue with her sisters as a way to learn more about sex:

My mother was very . . . she was very uptight about it until I was somewhat older. We don’t really talk to my dad about that stuff, but my sisters and I will talk about our sex

lives completely openly. So my sisters and I are in constant dialogue about our sex lives and other things as well.

To these women, open dialogue about sex was instrumental to the shaping of their sexual subjectivity. Although parents may have been part of the conversations about sex, participants could turn to sisters because they were able to express themselves more openly and talk about their sexual experiences. For these participants, sisters automatically became the desired “authorities” on sex not only because of the experience, but because of the trust they placed in their sister’s advice. Women negotiated the information that was provided to them by adult figures and therefore needed to reconcile the information they received with the “bigger picture” information of the intimate details of the act of sex by others such as friends, older siblings, and partners. It was not that parents were not necessarily willing to provide their children with information, but it was more about how daughters needed to work to negotiate the context and space of how and where these questions could be asked and ways the conversations could be directed.

What women ideally *wanted* parents to explain about sex, particularly in relation to themselves as sexual subjects, was either never or only partially revealed in the focus group discussions. Women admitted that when parents avoided talking about sex at home, the lack of discussion increased their curiosity about sex. Women’s curiosity and lack of information about sex encouraged them to buy in to the larger social assumption that women in college “go wild,” and make uneducated, unsafe decisions because of how little information or sexual experience

they have had. For example, Candy, a 21-year-old, straight African American from NU, talked about what it means for young women to come to college uneducated on the topic of sex:

It's those kids who don't know anything about it, parents didn't talk about it too much . . . and [they] come to college and go crazy. I've seen it happen. Some of my freshmen friends have already dropped out of school, you know? One of my friends was raped, you know, freshman year was wild for me, it was crazy.

Candy argued that sex should be more talked about within the home; she even argued that youth should experiment sexually before they come to college in order to gain experience and avoid “going wild” or become a victim of sexual assault. She thought that many of her friends who had little to no sexual experience would therefore have negative experiences in college because of their lack of experience. Candy understood that experiences like rape made her friends drop out of school and/or ruin their college experience. According to Candy, if these women were able to be more open sexually, they would be better equipped to make sexual decisions that would not result in painful and negative situations. It was not that these women deserved what happened to them, but for Candy it happened because her friends had not been exposed to sexual experiences or sexual discourse in the home that would have shaped their sexual decision-making. Candy positioned herself as an authority; her work of negotiation had been her ability to learn from her past experiences earlier on than her peers.

From their discussions, I understood that the women in my sample did not think that space had been created in the home to talk about their sexual desire. According to participants, parents assumed that their daughters were going to become sexual once they went to college and

therefore should be protected; or if they were already sexual, parents tried to ensure that their daughters knew the consequences; but they rarely made space to talk about desire, pleasure, or what it meant to recognize their daughters as sexual subjects. As Emma, a white, queer 19-year-old from NU, put it, “To my parents, I’m not a sexual being, I don’t have a sexuality.”

Conversations that *appeared* open were always a bit guarded. Warnings, threats, and, in some cases, humor were ways daughters understood parents to have regulated their behavior and talk at home. For example, Lindsay, a 22-year-old Latina from NU who did not identify a sexual orientation, talked about her mother, who would rather make jokes than address the “sex talk” straight on: “I don’t know, I feel like it’s more comfortable [for adults] making sexual jokes here and there.” Even those parents who made jokes about sex in their daughters’ presence were already setting boundaries without getting personal, because sex was not taken as seriously if conversations involved only humor. As Sarah, a white lesbian from NU, said, “Sex is funny until you start having it.” It seemed that the idea of sex as a “taboo” topic infiltrated into homes, where even in the most private and intimate moments between parent and child, sexual discourse could not fully penetrate. Women therefore needed to negotiate the filling in of those spaces and how they could develop their ideas on sexual authority and build upon their sexual subjectivities.

### **College as a Negotiated Site of Sexual Experimentation**

The women in my sample often utilized their college experiences as a way to figure out how to manage sex in a relationship, to discover what gave them pleasure, and to negotiate among the good girl expectations and the social expectations of college as a site to experiment sexually. College was a place for new independent thinking; a place to engage with, discover,

and explore sexuality and to become involved in dialogue with more varied and broadened worldviews. Despite college as a “safe space” for independent thinking, women’s emotional labor involved the process of negotiating what were assumed to be safe spaces and what were areas for resistance. Therefore, once on campus, women need to continue to negotiate the hurdles that were set before them, and, at times, the lack of sexual resources that were made available—or unavailable—to them on campus.

College was also a space where women admitted that they “could start over” or where they could become more comfortable expressing themselves sexually, such as coming out to their friends or experimenting with different sexual positions. However, despite the perceived open and safe space of college campuses to explore sexuality, women continued to negotiate their sexual subjectivity around their fears and worries of being labeled as “too easy” or not experienced enough as they worked through relationships with their partners, families, and friends. These groups of people were talked about as strong influences in these women’s lives because of how they helped women shape their sexual subjectivities. Therefore, the college experience became a “petri dish” for sexual experimentation and a space for filling in the educational gaps for women. For example, Marisa, a white, straight 19-year-old from ULCC, talked about how she saw college as a place to “start over”:

I think that in college people don’t know what you were like in your past, so you can come, you know, dressed differently, talk differently if you want to, you can say you have a whole different name and they will never know, and they could go out and if they act like, they could probably get what they want.

College was a site of freedom for Marisa, a place to completely take on a different identity simply because of all the new people she came into contact with. By starting over, people in college could either hide their previous identity, or come out with an identity they had been hesitant to reveal in high school. Becoming “someone else” also gave women permission to be someone else. Sandy, a straight, white 18-year-old from ULCC, talked about going out dancing with her friends while at college; it was the only place that she felt provided an opportunity and space where she could be a different person: “I get all dressed up and go out, and my alternate ego comes out, and I just wanna be like, I just wanna have fun, you know, I have the sexual desire to do things, when I can’t let myself normally.” Sandy’s description of having to be someone other than herself exemplified the emotional labor of her negotiation of her sexuality in college; college was not just a place for experimentation, but also as a site for her to negotiate social norms and expectations of female sexuality. For example, Sandy felt that although college was a place to “have fun,” she chose to experiment under the guise of another person, a bad girl, or as she described it, an “alternate ego.” She had a conflict between her self-image as a good girl and the alternate ego or identity that she understood as a safe way to express herself in a space outside of the context of family and school.

Women who identified as lesbian and/or bisexual found college to be a site where they could negotiate the regulation of their sexual identity; these women spoke about their sexual desire and how that desire was circumvented in a dominant heterosexist society, a society where straight persons’ desires are privileged over lesbian or bisexual pleasures. Emotional labor was a negotiated process of their sexual identity within the context of college and a hetero-normative

society. For example, Beatrix, a 19-year-old, white lesbian from NU, talked about her coming out process and discovering her sexual identity,

I think I came to understand my sexuality because it was so late [in college], it was all at once. It was like, holy shit! This is what it is, you know? I was in a relationship with a woman long before I came out, so it was like, I didn't have a sexual identity and I didn't have any sexual activity, but it was like, clearly I'm not straight because I'm dating this woman. And then you know, I came to college and took a couple of queer theories classes and it just kind of clicked, you know? It was like, Okay, sexual identity, check.

College was a site for Beatrix to figure out her sexuality and provided her an opportunity to see her identity as viable, healthy, and pleasurable. The courses Beatrix enrolled in affirmed her perspectives and deepened her perspective on her sexual identity. College was also a site for participating in sexual activism and advocating for one's sexual identity. However, for some women, being political about one's sexual identity was also a form of emotional labor. Having to defend their sexuality brought their sexual desires and identity out from the bedroom and into the public arena, often to be taken up by perfect strangers that were often in disagreement with their sexuality. For example, Sarah, a 21-year-old, white lesbian from NU, talked about her reluctance to become politically active and an advocate in regard to her sexuality,

I know that some people say that you should stand up for yourself and be an advocate and all that, but I don't really feel like being a martyr either. I would rather just keep quiet.

Although, I'm careful, like if there's a football game going on, I will not be holding hands with my partner . . . because the athletic world is pretty homophobic. I mean, better



safe than sorry. My friend went to a game, and she sat next to a guy who was talking about raping dykes and killing faggots.

Sarah negotiated the right “timing” of sharing her identity publicly, thereby working to identify safe spaces and safe people that would embrace her sexuality, or at the very least, she would not be in a place where it was threatened. Unlike her straight peers, Sarah needed to think about where and how she could be affectionate with her partner in public. Sarah, in reaction to her friend’s experience, worked to hide her sexual identity at public sporting events on campus so as to not encourage others to make lewd or hostile comments. She would prefer to keep quiet about her identity, rather than choose that time to portray herself as an advocate. Although earlier in the interview she had described her experience in college as being in a “pretty little bubble where no one can hurt me,” there were times when Sarah was still not protected on campus from experiencing hostility, or having to hide her identity. She instead needed to negotiate particular events associated with college life where she could express herself fully or ensure that her behaviors did not reflect her sexual identity. College, therefore, was not fully protected from outside influences from the dominant culture.

### **The Availability of Resources and the Issue of Class**

Although college was seen as a site for sexual exploration and freedom, part of the emotional work for women was seeking out the resources on college campuses that would help support this exploration. It was helpful to explain how sexual health resources at the women’s schools pointed to issues of class. In this regard the women who attended the community college had a different experience from those who had access to a private college’s resources. I found

that class became apparent when women talked about the resources, academic classes, and health resources that were made available to them at different institutions.

Relative to resources on ULCC's campus, for example, women were limited to the Health Center, a central place on campus where students were provided with basic health care, such as medical check-ups, over the counter medication, and the like. Within their limited number of student organizations students were also able to get involved in the Gay/Straight Alliance group, yet there was not an LGBT resource center on campus like the one NU and CSU students had access to. Programming on health and wellness education was also provided sporadically within the residence halls and throughout the academic year, mostly sponsored by residential life staff. While ULCC's resources were not as expansive as the services that NU provided to NU and CSU students, it is important to note that ULCC had only opened up their residence halls in 2003 and was slowly accustoming itself to providing a residential college experience.

Despite these efforts, ULCC participants bemoaned the limited services offered to them. For example, some of the women complained that these resources (especially health centers) were of "no help" or run by women who looked and reminded participants of "my grandma." Megan, a straight, white 18-year-old from ULCC, said: "My health teachers are like old ladies, I really would not feel comfortable talking to like a grandmother." Megan needed to negotiate where else she might go in order to get support relative to her sexual health; at times those resources tended to be agencies such as Planned Parenthood, which was off campus or located in her hometown. She explained: "I would probably honestly jump online and be like, "Where is

the nearest health clinic?” Or gynecologist. I would probably end up sort of reaching outside of campus.” Alex agreed that the quality of health services at ULCC was lacking: “This campus is not up to date in helping women.”

On the other hand, the Health Center at NU that supported both NU and CSU students worked in collaboration with other offices on campus, including the Advocacy Center and the LGBT Resource Center. These centers provided health and wellness services as well as events that advocated for victims of sexual violence, for example (women from NU and CSU talk about these programs in more detail in Chapter 6). Services also included a variety of sexual health initiatives, including providing condoms to residence hall floors, testing students for STIs and offering a number of birth control options and counseling on these matters. The LGBT Resource Center provided education, support, and a safe community space for LGBT, allies, students, faculty, and staff that NU and CSU participants talked about frequently in the discussions. The center also had a number of student organizations that focused on programmatic and educational initiatives (political and social in nature) on issues of sexual identity which students were able to become involved in.

College health services and programmatic initiatives were regulated by specific college policies regarding how they were run, what they had to offer, and how they were funded. Although residential living opened up possibilities of programmatic initiatives, events, and education involving the co-curricular nuances and realities of the holistic college experience, it varied according to institution; a community college had significantly less tuition costs, compared to the private institution with more money available to pay for a wider span of

resources. College may have been a site for sexual exploration; but it was also a site for negotiating one's sexual subjectivity within the confinements of being its own "(over) protective bubble." In the following chapter, I discuss in more detail how women exercised their agency through the process of this negotiation and how college provided space for resistance.

### **The Negotiation of Male Pleasure and its Impression upon Female Sexual Subjectivity**

Because male sexual pleasure, as mentioned in the last chapter, is often the focus during "first-time" sexual experiences, both women and men have an understanding of what male pleasure looks like and how men are satisfied sexually. However, straight women talked about the need to negotiate their own pleasures among dominant social expectations. Young women's understandings of male sexual pleasure are received through social messages via the media, other peers, partners, and formalized education; yet young women *and* men have little understanding of what it means to please a female. For example, Lindsey, a 20-year-old Puerto-Rican from NU who did not identify a sexual orientation, talked about her experience with male partners navigating female sexual pleasure, joking that women needed to be "like air traffic controllers" telling men "where to go and how to do it" relative to pleasuring women. Is this because female sexual desire is too complicated for men to figure out? Or is it that female sexual desire is not talked about often enough to offer straight men clear directions on how to navigate? Participants argued that because female sexual desire is simply not talked about enough within educational curricula, among friends, or even among families, that void left them to manage their sexual behaviors in particular ways; emotional labor for women involved working around these parameters.

Research—and participants alike—argued that it would be beneficial for women’s overall health and sexuality if female sexual desire were more of a focus within educational curricula. Deborah Tolman (2005) contended that “girls who are in touch with their desires appear more likely to know when they do not want to engage in sexual behaviors and are more likely to make conscious decision-making and communicate their desires safely” (p. 13). Micah, a 30-year-old, straight African American, agreed, admitting that “women are able to have better sex when they are able to ask for [what they want] sexually,” when they feel like they are able to make decisions and are able to exercise their sexual agency. What does it mean for upholding the good girl image when women are working hard to uphold this expectation but sacrificing the possibilities of having “better sex”? Part of the emotional labor process for women was abiding by social expectations and upholding social morale; another part was their negotiation of this expectation.

For instance, women assume responsibility for satisfying male desire because of socially assigned roles (Tolman, et al., 2005) and, therefore, some women’ curiosity about sex was about figuring out how to sexually please men or resisting hetero-normative standards while negotiating their own sexual subjectivity. Furthermore, research focuses on the loss of female pleasure within heterosexual, male-dominated relationships, yet fails to examine female sexual desire overall and particularly what it means for women who identify as bisexual or lesbian. For example, Johan, a white lesbian from NU, commented on her understanding of straight sex, “I feel like lesbian sex is specifically about mutual pleasure. From what I understand from straight people, they often tell me, “Oh my guy gets off and then he has to finish me.” Here, Johan

described how her sexual pleasure with another woman was mutually gratifying simply because she did not have to worry about having to satisfying a man. Johan's emotional work was more about the negotiation of her experience as a lesbian within a hetero-normative society than about becoming caught up in satisfying a male sexual partner. Vicky, a 21-year-old Dominican from NU who was in a relationship with a woman was more graphic in how she explained her pleasure in being with a woman,

With women it's [sex] is so much better! It's like they know what to do . . . and where.

With guys, I just kind of sat there. But women kind of know how to . . . like that really excites me now. A good fuck for me would be a quick, intense, and just like don't kiss me, fuck me, I just want to come and then we can go about our day. Making love is all, like it's the foreplay, it's like the wine on the side of the bed . . . it's me kissing you, talking to you, caressing you, kind of feeling your essence with mine. I love that, I prefer that. If you don't have feelings for someone, you can't make love to someone.

Vicky, like Johan, felt that it was much easier to please—and be pleased by—a woman than a man. To Vicky, like other participants, having an emotional connection was significant to having a pleasurable sexual relationship; the only difference between Vicky and her straight peers was that she preferred to have a relationship and make love to a *woman*. However, her negotiation of sexual pleasure was situated in comparison to her previous experiences with men and juxtaposed with the norm of heterosexual activity; she therefore used these previous experiences as an opportunity to set a standard for how she enjoyed sex.

Women who identified as bisexual and lesbian had a higher level of work to do when it came to negotiating their sexual identity within a privileged hetero-normative context. Kirsten, a white, bisexual 20-year-old from CSU admitted:

Whenever they [people] look at you, they just see it [sexual identity] stamped across your forehead, that you're, like, you know, homosexual or whatever. It's not like that's not the only thing about me, that's what I don't like about it. It's like, hello! I've felt this way for a lot of my years.

Kirsten's sexual identity was ever present, whether she was with her partner or simply with friends. She consistently needed to manage her behaviors within a society that did not understand or make space to validate them. Avoiding judgment and managing guilt involved emotional work for women on many varying levels; for Sarah, who had admitted her preference to remain quieter about her sexuality, the shame of sexual identity in a hetero-normative world affects lesbian and bisexual women's subjectivity, and as a result, how women ultimately come to make sexual decisions.

In their work of negotiating sexual pleasure, some women in the study understood orgasm as something that was a struggle to achieve, an anomaly that was not talked about within their homes and most sex education curricula. To these women, the female orgasm was constructed as a mystery or something that only their sexual partners, in particular male partners, could help them achieve. Nicole, a 21-year-old, straight Dominican from NU, talked about her limited knowledge of orgasm, based on what she saw in the movies:

I wish I knew that I couldn't always get an orgasm, like I thought it was an "always" thing. Like that was what you achieved every single time you had sex. But obviously, that's not realistic. I guess they make it seem like you get an orgasm in the movies!

Nicole's work was figuring out what sexual desire looked like beyond the movies and adjusting those perceptions to reality. Candy, a 21-year-old, straight African American from NU talked about depending upon her partners to help her come to an orgasm:

I'm out there trying to have sex, and I don't even know what I'm doing. You know? I don't know why I'm not having an orgasm. So I keep doing it, I go to this person, I'm trying out this person, thinking, Okay, someday I will make this happen for me, somebody will make it good. For me, it became, I'm here to please the man and I never knew I was actually supposed to get pleasure out of it.

Candy believed that sexual pleasure was intended for a man to demonstrate to a woman how sex should be. As a result, Candy did not feel entitled to her own sexual pleasure, or more so, that she could become an agent of her sexuality. Her labor involved continual experimenting in the attempt to have an orgasm, but needing to find someone else who could give her one. Her negotiation came from reconciling what she initially believed about women's sexual pleasure with her recognition and exploration of the need to have an orgasm. When talking about exploring sexual pleasure and how women could make *themselves* sexually pleased, there were varying answers from the participants. For example, women talked about how achieving an orgasm from masturbation alone was discounted as a "real" sexual experience as Cuse, a Korean senior from NU who did not identify a sexual orientation, explained: "To masturbate and feel



that orgasm, I feel like I'm wrong, cause I don't know, it's not a real orgasm. But it was still easy to me." For Cuse, although it was easy for her to masturbate, she still felt that the orgasm she achieved was not "real" because it was not shared with another partner. Cuse understood masturbation to be "wrong" because it was an activity outside of a dominant heterosexist context, and she had to work to manage her desire within that. For Cuse, without a male partner the sexual act was not considered "real" or complete. Her emotional labor negotiating what "was easy" and what was considered appropriate for "good girls" and managing her behavior in accordance to that image. Brooke, a 21-year-old, white bisexual from NU, also talked about her boyfriend teaching her about masturbation:

I didn't explore anything with masturbation until my boyfriend and I got together. We watched porn together, and he started pleasuring me while we were watching porn, and I was very weirded out with it at first, and then I was like, Okay, I need to kind of let go and try it.

Brooke saw her boyfriend as the authority when it came to masturbation and sex. According to some of the participants, male partners served as authorities because they helped the women to achieve orgasm, sexually experiment (according to male desires), and/or helped them move through the motions of sexual activity, particularly during their first experience. For example, Emma a white, queer 19-year-old from NU, said:

My first relationship wasn't a two-way street. It was mostly about him because I didn't understand my own sexuality yet so it was mostly about his pleasure and he didn't really

try and focus on what I wanted, because he knew what felt good to him. But that doesn't necessarily translate into feeling good for the girl.

Emma had a clearer idea of what it meant for a man to experience sexual pleasure, because of how she understood how male sexual desire was privileged within society and dominant discourse. Her work was the process of coming to this understanding; because of the privileging of male sexual pleasure, women needed to figure out the female orgasm and often depended on male partners to show them what an orgasm is and how it should feel. Many of the participants, despite their experience, background, or viewpoint, often relied on more sexually experienced peers—or authorities—to negotiate and navigate their sexuality and pleasures. Although some participants learned specifics of sexual pleasure from peers, relying on others for sexual direction added to the shaping of their subjectivity.

Participants also expressed an understanding that having sex fulfilled an expectation that was set by their partner(s). Although women in the study talked about their desire to have sex, some women described their desire to *not* have sex. For example, Nicole, a 21-year-old, straight Dominican from NU, talked about sex with her boyfriend in college:

. . . (I) do it for him. Like, I'll stay there and have sex more for him. I just feel awkward sometimes because so many people talk about how, "Ohmigod sex is the best. It's like my number one next to sleeping and eating or something," and for me, it's like the last thing. I can never talk about sexual pleasure with a man in that way because I still haven't, like I could count maybe a few times where I felt like it's been really good, but after a while, I just want it to stop, because it's not really going anywhere for me.

Nicole had sex with her boyfriend because she knew that *he* wanted it; she was working to avoid hurting her boyfriend's feelings. For Nicole, sex was obligatory and routine at times, a space that felt "not normal" due to her perceived lack of sexual desire and how she compared herself to others. Negotiating the dominant expectations of a heterosexist relationship, she spared her desires in order to appease his.

Participants like Nicole felt pressured into doing something that they were unsure about, not educated about, and did not ultimately desire to do. Past experiences taught women that they *needed* to expect an emotional connection; the unfortunate part about this expectation is that most participants expressed that they had to learn the hard way (i.e., have negative sexual experiences including harassment or rape, as referred to earlier) in order to recognize what they truly desired—or did not desire—within a sexual relationship. Women who are educated about sexual desire, knowledge of their bodies, and what they *do* enjoy allows them to become more assertive when saying no to what they *do not* enjoy or desire sexually. There is danger in making assumptions about where the pleasure is in women's sexual activity—that these "girls gone wild" or "bad girls" always want sex from men or always are "asking for it," according to how they behave, dress, and/perform sexually. Dominant sexual discourses work together to normalize the sexual coercion of women by men and therefore blur the boundaries of what is "just sex" and what is, in fact, rape and sexual assault (Senn, 2011).

Past research has shown that young women are under a significant amount of pressure to manage their sexual reputations and to control men's sexuality as well as their own (Tolman, et al., 2005). Women's positive sexual experiences during initial sexual encounters were few and

far between because they were so busy trying to figure out who they were sexually and defining their sexual subjectivity; women often felt they were not able to fully grasp what they should be doing—or how they should be doing it—when it came to sex. Women’s emotional labor involved having to manage their decisions in relation to their understanding of male sexual pleasure and how they defined emotional intimacy within a sexual relationship.

### **The Desire for Emotional Connection**

Throughout the conversations, I found that the desire for and having an emotional connection with their partner was what made sex most pleasurable for women. As I discussed earlier in the literature review on emotional work, having an emotional connection within a sexual relationship *was* important to these women. The sense of trust, comfort, and emotional connection was what participants consistently said they desired from a relationship (sexual and romantic) and what they asked for in most relationships. Their definitions of emotional intimacy—or an emotional connection—varied, but they all negotiated their understanding of society’s expectations and definitions of what it means to be “emotional” and how they defined their own levels of intimacy. How women defined an emotional connection varied from participant to participant; for some, it was being in love, to others it was just being able to trust someone, for other participants it was simply the feeling of being needed by a partner.

Women worked to negotiate their understanding of an emotional connection in juxtaposition with how male sexuality is privileged and the good girl image. But when I asked them what sexual pleasure meant to them, they also said that an emotional connection was a part of having “good sex.” For most women, having a sexual relationship was not quite complete

unless it involved some sort of an emotional connection, or being “intimate” with a partner.

Women desire an emotional connection because that is *expected* of them according to the good girl image. Social expectations for sexual behaviors, particularly women’s, dictate that having sex outside the relationship is morally wrong; therefore, social discourse implies that women “naturally” desire committed relationships in order to prevent reputation damage and maintain an acceptable and good girl image in the eyes of society (Heldman & Wade, 2010). Therefore, women’s emotional labor came into tension with how they managed their *emotions* in the midst of their sexual desire, and how they discerned where innate physical sexual desire starts and desire for an emotional connection begins. Women negotiated how they understood an emotional connection in juxtaposition with how male sexuality is privileged.

For example, some of the participants talked about how having an emotional connection was a necessary component of their sexual relationships. Sonia, a 19-year-old, straight African American from NU, admitted: “I think sex is much better when you’re in love. I know it’s very cliché, but I really think so. Just because it’s more emotional and it’s not just to get off.” Here, Sonia was clear in her definition of being “in love” as an emotional connection and something that she desired to have within a sexual relationship. According to Sonia, having sex to “just get off” was an incomplete part of a relationship. Candy, a 21-year-old, straight African American from NU agreed,

I need to actually like the person, not just what they look like on the outside, because everyone [partners] prior to that just looked good. I didn’t have a connection with them anyway, so maybe that’s why I couldn’t get as wet as I could.

Candy talked about the negotiation of sexual pleasure based on her past experiences, and that having an emotional connection with someone was what got her sexually excited or “wet.” To become emotionally intimate with someone was the ultimate form of sexual pleasure, but also a form of emotional labor to figure out whom she could have a sexual relationship *with*. Candy worked to align her sexual pleasure along with her desire to be emotionally connected or intimate with someone. Like Candy, Marisa, a straight, white 19-year-old from ULCC spoke about sexual desire in terms of her partner “being there” emotionally: “I think it [sexual desire] means obviously feeling good while having sex, but like laying with that person after and knowing that they’re going to be there for you.” For women like Marisa, pleasurable sex was not necessarily about the act itself, but the connection it created between her and her partner.

For some women, sexual pleasure emerged simply from feeling needed by their partner; having sex, according to some participants, confirmed the emotional aspects of the relationship and the level of intimacy the couple shared. For example, Sara a straight, white 18-year-old from ULCC, talked about her long-distance relationship with her boyfriend who still lived in her hometown:

It’s special because I don’t get to see him as much, and then, in terms of that adrenaline rush right before we have sex and then, the feeling after, and I get to cuddle with him, it makes me feel better. You know, it’s making me fall even more in love with him. He waits for me and I’m waiting for him [in between times seeing each other] ‘cause I love him.

Being with her boyfriend was more than just experiencing the physical sexual pleasure; instead, it was more about the emotional connection and the feeling Sara “got after” having sex. Waiting to have sex in between their visits made sex worth the wait for Sara; here, she was attaching her feelings of love to how she spoke about sex. Tara, a straight, white 19-year-old from CSU, also placed weight on the emotional connection within her sexual relationships. She said:

For me, sexual pleasure is more about the emotional connection and I don't really ever focus on myself, actually, I enjoy more to make him feel pleasure, because I don't really care about it myself, like to me, it's not a big deal. I don't know I would rather see my boyfriend like really happy and like feeling good cause I care about him. Like I would be fine if I never had sex, I don't care about it, but like, he does, so I like to share that with him and I like feeling that I'm doing something with him that no other girl—or boy for that matter—could do with him.

Tara believed that pleasurable sex was having an emotional connection with her boyfriend; doing something with him that she knew made *him* feel good and understanding that it was an act that only the two of them could share together. Her “not caring” about sex was not necessarily silencing her sexual subjectivity, but in fact shaping what she knew felt good and pleasurable to her. For Tara, having intimacy within a relationship was about pleasing her boyfriend and sharing an experience that was between the two of them. Tara did not necessarily care about *the act of sex* per say, but she did care about maintaining the relationship.

Alex, a 22-year-old, Southeast Asian from ULCC that identified as gay, also talked about good sex as having an “emotional connection.” However, her definition placed more weight on trust rather than pleasure, and she described her view as “safe” sex:

To me, it [safe sex] would be having an emotional connection, it would be worthwhile, you would feel safe and comfortable. And it really isn’t necessarily about a release, because I honestly think I’ve never had an orgasm, but being aware of that I was being cared for the person or they were doing their best to make me happy . . . that’s safe.

Alex believed that being safe with a partner meant having an emotional connection within a trusting relationship. Although she admitted she had never experienced an orgasm, Alex understood that her pleasure was more about the emotional connection she desired to have with someone. Her perception of being safe or what made sex “really good” differed from what society perceives as “being safe” or “protecting yourself,” such as remaining abstinent or using condoms. How she talked about intimacy was connected to trust, and Alex worked to manage her decisions in regard to these feelings. The desire for an emotional connection in a sexual relationship involved women working to negotiate the dominant understanding of women being “emotional” as well as their experiences of what made sex “good.”

Some participants worked to negotiate their past learning about sex in how they defined a relationship in college; for example, social discourse teaches that intimacy, or having an emotional connection, is a necessary component of a sexual relationship, particularly for women in a male-female relationship. For example, Beatrix, a 19-year-old, white lesbian from NU,



talked about how she understood what it meant to have a sexual relationship based on how she viewed herself emotionally,

Sex was always something that once I learned about it, it would be, you know, something that I would do when I was much older, something that I would only do when I was in love, you know? Sex is something that, you know, I have to be in love. And that was kind of the way that I made that decision, the way that I make my decisions, you know, I run very emotionally.

According to Beatrix, sex was what you did when you were older and in a committed and loving relationship. Beatrix's emotions about sex directed her decision-making, how she should feel about the sexual relationship, and how she should manage her feelings in order to align with her learned expectations.

Johan, a 19-year-old, white lesbian from NU, complicated the dominant social discourse of the emotional aspect of sex a bit, as she negotiated the expectation of what is socially constructed as *ideal* in a relationship and how she should be trying to achieve that in a relationship,

If sex is more meaningful with someone that you care about then, like, should I be trying to make that happen all the time? And if I don't, does that mean that the ideal is wrong? What does it mean to care about somebody? Can't you care about somebody temporarily?"

Johan was concerned in how her decision-making came into conflict with normalized ideals of an acceptable sexual relationship, and she managed her sexual decisions within that negotiation.

Johan, because of how she questioned what intimacy looked like, worked to make sense of what is considered to be wrong or right. According to social norms, the expectation of having a sexual relationship is that it would be with someone that you care about or are emotionally connected to. Johan queried that expectation here, juxtaposing it against how she made decisions about a sexual partner. For these women, they worked to negotiate not just what it meant to have an emotional connection in a sexual relationship, but how they might achieve that in order to justify their reason for wanting sex.

For participants, *good* sex was not about having an orgasm; rather it was about negotiating their sexual pleasures along with their needs for an emotional connection. For some of the women, having sex with their partners was a way to either confirm them as a sexual being or make them feel more needed or as a way to cope with a problem. They worked to forgo an emotional need in substitution for that power. For example, Lindsay, a 22-year-old Latina from NU who did not identify a sexual orientation, talked about wanting sex to reconcile her “need to belong to someone,” utilizing sex as a way to feel good about *her*, not him. She talked about sex with her first boyfriend:

Like, I had sex with my first boyfriend as a coping mechanism, I was having a lot of problems with my parents at that time when we first were dating or when I had my first boyfriend, so a lot of times that we had sex was more so that I felt like I needed to belong to someone. Sex is also an ego boost. A form of communication for me to like, I don’t feel like saying anything or if I feel like my words aren’t getting through to him, let’s just have sex and see if you get it after that.

Having power and control over each of her sexual relationships exemplified Lindsey's need to have confidence within the sexual relationship. To have power meant that she felt validated as a woman and that she ultimately had control over her sexuality. Lindsey used her decision to have sex as a coping mechanism along with her need for an emotional attachment and/or a way to communicate with her sexual partner. Utilizing sex in this way allowed Lindsay to have control over not just the actual act of sex, but also her desire within the confines of that particular sexual relationship. Lindsay understood that sex was something that could give her power; it was an act of resistance against the privileging of male needs. Power was something negotiated for when it came to women exercising their agency. Kristina, a 20-year-old, straight Puerto-Rican from NU, agreed and commented:

I was thinking about what Lindsay was saying about empty sex. The first time I tried to have empty sex it was a lot because I wanted to have control. I had just got out of a long-term relationship and I was like I just need one person where I can be like "Hey, where you at, come here," and that's it. There's no emotion tied to it. I had just broken up with a boyfriend who had hurt me deeply. So I finally broke free from that, you know, little by little, and all of a sudden he was trying to call me still, and I was like, no. Then I felt more in control, so I was like calling somebody else up, like "Hey what's up, wanna cum?" So that was my experience with empty sex.

Here, Kristina negotiated her sexual desires in an attempt to reconcile them with her feelings over her most recent break-up; to her, "empty sex" was not about an emotional connection but rather about privileging her sexual aggression over a male partner's. "Empty" sex for Kristina

was void of any intimacy—or of having an emotional connection—in regard to sex; instead it was about her having power and control. This negotiation allowed her to think subjectively about how she was approaching her sexual decision-making and also how she considered past relationships. Situating her sexual desire outside of the dominant social script of heterosexism still was not without emotional work, even though she labeled the actual act as “empty.” Kristina and Lindsey both managed their decisions in a way that gave them sexual agency—or what they defined as having power—within a sexual relationship. Women saw authorities as having control of sexual knowledge; their work was about reclaiming and negotiating that power.

### **Being Policed and Policing Others; Negotiating Between the Two Tensions**

As mentioned in the last chapter, there are many ways in which women are regulated by peers, partners, families, religion, and education in relation to the good girl/bad girl dichotomy. These social groups, drawing upon particular social boundaries, police women in order to maintain expectations in accordance with dominant discourses. Women performed emotional labor when negotiating these boundaries, policing other women (in addition to themselves) upon those limitations and determining who (e.g., peers) had crossed boundaries, and comparing their own sexual behaviors with this measuring stick. Policing involved women managing others' behavior based on established social rules and regulations. For example, Vicky, a 21-year-old Dominican who was in a relationship with a woman, talked about being judged by her more religious peers,

Don't judge me for what I'm doing. That's been a big issue in college. I didn't think it would be. A lot of my black friends especially, they're like Baptist, and so they're like

“Oh that’s bad,” but you’re doing it too, so what are you saying? Is it bad because I’m fucking girls? I don’t understand. I feel like I’m very defensive with my sexuality, because a lot of people like to question and judge.

Although Vicky worked to ignore the judgments from her friends, she still felt she needed to *defend* her sexuality and decisions to her peers. Vicky’s emotional work stemmed from her overall desire for “fucking girls” and having to negotiate and affirm the realities of her sexual identity among her friends within a dominant heterosexist setting. Her friends’ policing pushed Vicky into having to manage and question her sexual decisions.

Friends were one of the top resources that women used to inform their sexual decision-making and “fill in any holes” that formalized education had left empty. Women either sought out other female friends to be educators, or avoided some of their friends to escape possible judgment. Peers, by describing their own sexual experiences to other women, informally established rules in how sex should be or how one should behave and exhibited these rules through the act of policing. These particular rules about how one should behave, react, or not act upon sexual desires were all a product of resistance to or alignment with a dominant ideological framework. For example, Dara, a white, straight 20-year-old from CSU, talked about feeling judged by her friends based on mistakes that she had made in college and “now regretted,” and how she needed to defend her sexual reputation in order to be accepted and avoid becoming labeled. She explained:

I live with three people who are very open about telling me what they think about my sexual life or what they assume is my sexual life. Like I can’t spend the night with a guy

that is a friend for convenience of not walking home, and it's [the decision] so based on perceptions that they have about mistakes that I have made, things that I don't consider part of my lifestyle. Yes there are mistakes that I've made and that I regret, but that somehow it's alright for those three [her roommates] to tell me that they think I'm a slut and they'll joke around about it, and for the longest time I put up with it and laughed it off. But I'm finally coming to terms with that it's not alright and it's not okay and that you shouldn't be so quick to judge people.

Dara negotiated her decisions based upon her friends' perceptions of her behavior and worked to reconcile and negotiate her own feelings on the basis of how she was judged. Although she admitted that being judged was "not alright," she still struggled with how she might communicate this—and express herself accordingly—to her roommates as someone who does not normally make bad girl decisions and who lives the lifestyle of a good girl. Dara was insistent that her actions should not be judged without proper evidence, and she worked to convince others of that. Such policing caused Dara to manage how she framed her behavior as "mistakes" rather than as "choices."

To maintain and negotiate alignment with being a "good girl," participants also sought out friends they knew that were more experienced and/or had their same level of sexual experience in order to be judged less or not at all; for participants, it was easier to compare themselves to women they did not view as "sluts," or friends they knew would validate their behavior as "normal." Missy, a straight, white 19-year-old from ULCC explained:

It's not like I tell just anyone. But people like my best friends I tell. Cause it's nice to get feedback as long as we can laugh about it, but you know, it's like if I don't tell anybody I don't know if I'm doing the right thing. They could be like, "Missy, what are you doing?" Or I could be like, "Ohmigosh, I'm a horrible person," and they're like, "No it's fine", you know?

Missy not only relied on her friends to justify her sexual behavior and activities, but also turned to them for the purpose of reflection and the ability to confide in someone. By talking it out or reflecting on her behaviors with others, Missy felt she was able to better direct her sexual decisions and shape her subjectivity. Isabelle, a straight, white 18-year-old from ULCC, also turned to friends to learn from their experiences:

You learn what doesn't work from other friends' stories more so than what does work . . . a lot of my friends are more open to talk about their experiences that didn't work, like their funny stuff, like, "I didn't know what we were thinking, but this does not work," or whatever rather than like the stuff that did work. So you learn what not to do from friends a lot of times.

Isabelle turned to her friends not just to share her experiences, but mostly to hear from them on what was acceptable or what "worked" with their sexual partners in regard to sexual activities. Although Isabelle understood these conversations as opportunities to share and learn from her friends, it was a form of "checking in" with each other to ensure that they all felt that they were doing what was "normal" or what felt good in regard to sexual activities. To "check in" with friends was emotional work as women worked to negotiate their decisions in comparison to

decisions of others. Women found themselves “checking in” with friends in order to normalize and confirm sexual behavior or activity that they felt guilty or uncomfortable about. For example, Skye, a white, straight 33-year-old from ULCC, when asked about how she talked about sex with her friends, explained how she policed herself about whom she shared her sexual experiences and questions with,

It’s something that we don’t usually do, it’s something that’s a little taboo to talk about.

You might talk about it with like your closest girlfriends, but even with your closest girlfriends, you might not say everything, because you might be worried that they’re going to think that you’re a freak, because you might not be what they like, or it might [be what they like]! You don’t know because, you know, you don’t say it.

Skye checked in with herself first before she shared information with her close girlfriends because of other anxieties she had about how she might be judged by them. Her most embarrassing sexual secrets she kept to herself for fear that they would think she was a “freak.” Therefore, Skye managed her talk in correlation to her anxiety about how she might be judged by others. Sex was seen as taboo, and saying “too much” might make her appear not “normal” to others. Despite her anxiety around friends, Skye felt free to share with complete strangers in the focus group! I believe that what also may have helped was other members sharing their anxiety and concerns around this issue.

While I found that friendships among women formed a support group of sorts for sexual education and validation, women also policed other women by using labels, like “whore” and “slut” in order to affirm the reality of the good girl vs. bad girl discourse, to re-affirm their own



sexuality, and to shape how women came to think about and make their own sexual decisions. Women discussed the limitations that were established for them relative to their sexuality and what it meant to be sexually promiscuous. Women either saw themselves or others as a slut, prude, or good girl. Women asked each other, “What does a slut mean to you?” Such questions abounded within the focus groups when it came to talking about and defining labels. Micah, a 30-year-old, straight African American from NU, explained about the stereotypes attached to the label of slut:

It’s not like every stereotype is false, you know; some stereotypes tend to be true. But I think we as individuals also, we just add to it as well, we help the situation. We help, we speak out too: “She’s a slut” because she’s wearing a short skirt or whatever.

Micah felt that women not only police each other with these labels, but also work to ensure the maintenance and reaffirmation of these stereotypes.

Therefore, women’s definitions of slut varied; their definitions often did not have to do with how much sex a woman had, yet had to do with *why* a woman chose to have sex. Consider some of the following definitions used by participants: Kristin, a 20-year-old, straight Puerto-Rican from NU, defined sluts as “girls who need way too much attention and they do whatever they can in order to get it.” Lindsay, a 22-year-old Latina who did not identify a sexual orientation, agreed somewhat in her definition: “Someone who has sex, not for purpose of self-satisfaction or gratification, but someone who does it just because, like, “Oh, I don’t see a big deal in it,” or “I’m just gonna try to get off here.” To these women, being a slut meant that either there was no defined reason for a woman to have sex, or if there was, it was because she was

trying to move past a particular negative experience. Casey, a 20-year-old, straight African American from NU explained:

The girls that I have met usually have reasons behind it that go deeper than them just having sex. Like I know a girl who was raped, I know a girl whose father died and like that night she had sex with three different guys. I was like where were you friends at? She was just going wild. There are people who do that, but the girls that I've met usually have some internal conflict going on and that's the reason why they have [sex].

According to Casey, women were not sluts because they enjoyed or wanted to have a lot of sex, but rather it was because they were reacting to a particular tragedy or situation in their life. For Casey, being a slut went beyond having sex; instead, "going wild" was a *reaction* to something that was happening within the bigger picture of women's lives. Defining slut was also a strategy for women to draw a line between what was considered good and bad reasons for having sex within the dominant confines of society; it was a way for women to explain other women's behaviors in reference to their own. For these women, being a slut was being "othered," or being someone that was different from them, or acting the way that they never would (Tannenbaum, 2000). To be a slut was a form of policing in how women saw themselves as good girls or bad girls and how they thought about and negotiated their decision-making in reference to these definitions.

Because policing was important to upholding particular regulations and rules, women managed their behavior in accordance with this form of social maintenance. Emotional labor included the work women did in order to avoid these labels and maintain the image of a good

girl. Emma, a white, queer 19-year-old from NU, talked about the work entailed in the negotiation of these labels:

Because sex is seen as something as highly personal and if you have too much sex, you're a slut, but if you don't have enough sex, you're a prude and like there will be all these gray areas that people don't want to get caught in. They haven't been given the tools to express themselves and they're just not comfortable with their own sexuality because they're not really given an outlet to express it.

Emma understood that the boundaries between being a “slut” and a “prude” are indeed gray and can become blurred. She commented that because people are not adequately taught to express themselves sexually, they do not feel comfortable in their sexual subjectivity. Although she commented that sex was seen as “personal” or private, Emma still understood that sexual behavior was to be judged by others; because of the regulations and labels society places upon women *and* men, these defined expectations limit how one expresses oneself sexually and talks about sex. Women therefore worked to negotiate between these tensions.

Those participants who considered themselves less sexually experienced, like Jane, a straight, white 20-year-old from CSU, often described policing by peers as being omitted from conversations or group activities. Jane admitted that she felt left out of her circle of friends because she was a virgin:

I don't belong. That's what I feel like, because I haven't . . . had sex yet. My friends, they are all like, “Well you're good and you're going to find the perfect guy and you're going to be with him for the rest of your life and it's because you've waited so long [to have

sex] and you've seen us go through so many changes that you know what to look for now." And like I went through high school and I watched all my best, really close friends go through really awful relationships and I was like, "That's not me," like I prefer to focus on myself and where I'm going. I feel it will happen eventually if the right person comes along.

Jane developed her thoughts about waiting "for the right person" from her perceptions of her friends' negative experiences with sex and relationships. By defining Jane's experiences based upon how they understood what it meant to be a virgin, her friends policed her behavior by singling out her virginity as something that was unique to the group. Jane's friends also framed her sexuality within the good girl context and ensured that her lack of experience was the entry way into "finding the perfect guy." To Jane's friends, being a bad girl or having had sex already implied that they may not find the perfect guy, or they may have to go through a number of additional negative relationships in order to find one. Yet, at the same time, Jane described how her friends' talk about sex made her feel left out because she was a virgin. Her negotiation between waiting and wanting to be accepted by her friends was complicated, and only made more complex by her friends' making excuses for what they perceived as her inexperience. For Jane, sex was something that was "not for her" and she instead preferred to wait. Jane's decision-making, although informed by her friends, involved her negotiation between how they perceived her lack of sexual experience and how Jane understood it. Despite her friends' influences, Jane demonstrated a clear understanding of her experience by shifting the focus off her virginity and concentrating on "just being" herself; she did not need to have sex in order to become sexually

subjective. Nicole, a straight Dominican from NU, talked about how her lack of sexual experience earned her the label “the virgin one” among her friends, and she explained how she was excluded her from their conversations:

I was always known as the “virgin” one or the “good” one, or the one that didn’t have enough experience to be in relationships because I never had long-term relationships, so certain topics within the girls who had the experience or were in the relationships, would kind of exclude me out of it because maybe I didn’t have enough input, or I don’t know, I guess they thought that I would be too judgmental.

Like Jane, Nicole described herself as being segregated from her friends based upon her sexual inexperience and the fact that she was a “good girl.” Nicole understood that, based upon her inexperience, her friends would think that she would be judgmental when it came to sharing their own sexual experiences with her, ironically a concept that was solidified by some other participants earlier in the conversation. Like Lindsay, a Latina from NU who did not identify a sexual orientation, said, “I feel like I have to pick and choose who I have sexual conversations with and I feel like there are details that I expose to certain people.” Stacey, a straight Puerto-Rican from NU, also talked about her choice of whom she shared her sexual experiences with:

My college friends, we are open about sex, but I think it’s still like, every time I talk to them about sex, I feel like they’re judging me and I think they feel the same way. It’s like we don’t want to say too much so they don’t think we’re a certain way or like not a certain way.

Stacey's work was figuring out what it meant to be a good girl and make sense of her behaviors that would fit within that context. Women like Stacey and Lindsay affirmed the assumption Nicole was making about how she believed her friends feared that she might "judge" them or that she would think negatively about them based upon their sexual decisions. These concerns, and how women negotiated their choice in friendships and confidantes, all involved a component of emotional labor as they chose how, when, and with whom to share their sexual concerns, questions, and desires. No matter the level of experience, each woman experienced anxiety over being excluded, judged, or left out of their peer circles based upon their sexual choices and sexuality; therefore, they needed to manage their decisions within these negotiations.

For participants (no matter the level of experience), the questions of the "how-to's" of sex, such as how do they act, please their partner, or if what they were doing with their partner was "normal," were often exchanged among friends at lunch tables, slumber parties, and within the confines of residence hall rooms. Women revealed that they preferred "face-to-face" talk with their friends rather than talking via social networks, such as instant messaging and Facebook. This sort of information about sexual behavior and preferences was simply too private for women to publicly display on the Internet. Here, women participated in emotional work not only to further educate themselves, but also to carefully choose friends and confidants that they knew would not judge them. For example, Megan, a white, straight 18-year-old from ULCC leaned on friends that she knew she could trust:

*It's more comfortable, 'cause most girls that are my friends have already experienced it [sex], so you're not worrying about everyone, you know, having bad thoughts about you*

or your reputation being ruined. It makes it a lot easier . . . when everyone is kind of in the same boat.

Not only did Megan feel that she could confide in friends with similar experiences, but she could also trust them to not judge her or let her secrets out to others, and “ruin her reputation.” Brooke, a white bisexual from NU, also commented on what it meant to put her sexuality on public display,

I felt like if you’re openly talking about sex, or sexual acts you’ve done, or that you want to do, that it makes you look very slutty and there’s a double standard where guys are kind of, supposed to talk about sex, and it’s like cool for them to say, “Oh I slept with this person,” but if a girl even sleeps with one guy, she can be considered a slut for it. So I’ve always been really scared to talk about it in school.

Brooke understood the double standard of it being acceptable for men to have sex, but not for women outside the context of a committed romantic relationship. Therefore, for the sake of salvaging her reputation, she kept her sexual desires to herself rather than sharing openly with others. She policed her own desires to avoid the risk of being labeled a “slut.” Avoiding judgment, like Brooke and Megan suggested, involved women having to manage their sexual behavior and negotiate the varying definitions connected to those labels. Shame that became attached to their sexual behaviors shaped women’s sexual subjectivity and how they made decisions on how to present themselves to others as a sexual being.

Some women of color, while negotiating the eroticized and racialized images of the “hypersexual woman of color,” utilized a dominant framework to make sense of their white

peers' behaviors and juxtaposed society's assumptions of their sexuality against that. For example, Casey, a 20-year-old, straight African American from NU talked about how white men, like the one she described below, desired her sexually simply based on her race:

He like followed me around the whole night saying, Please, please can I come home with you? I'm like what the hell, no! Like at least if you said something like more like just come up to me like a regular person not saying, Oh you're black, can I hook up with you. You didn't say you were pretty, you didn't say anything, but yeah, no, it's just like you're black so let's go. But now I realize I tend to be attracted to the boys that have already had experience with black girls, so it's like nothing new to them. It's just like, Oh they know how to approach me, they know how to talk to me, they know stuff.

Casey pushed back against how was she was being objectified because of her race and asked for him to recognize her as a "regular person" instead of an object for his pleasure. She was frustrated that he saw her only for the color of her skin rather than seeing her as a person or even being "pretty." Casey was clear in describing her denial of his requests and how she needed to position herself as a viable sexual subject rather than an object. Therefore, she worked to negotiate whom she was sexually attracted to in how she read their genuine interest in her, rather than their interest in making a conquest or having an opportunity to experiment.

Despite her annoyance, Casey went on to talk about her desire for "white boys" that have already had experience with "black girls." However, she also discussed her fear of "catching something" from these men based on her assumption that these men had been sexually active with white women, "I'm like so scared to be with a white guy who had sex with a white girl. If



he had sex or touched a white girl I just feel like puking in my mouth . . . I think she's dirty."

According to Casey, it was the white women who were promiscuous; therefore, she resisted becoming involved with straight white male partners because they had been sexually intimate with a white woman. Although she pushed back against how she was perceived as a woman of color, Casey positioned white women as more "hypersexualized" based upon *their* skin color and her perception of their sexual behaviors in college. Casey's observation in that particular group discussion started a conversation among other participants of color, a conversation that juxtaposed women of color's sexuality against white women's sexuality based upon their current college experience.

For example, participants suggested that white women have "sex with everybody" and that they could not understand the concept of "making out" with complete strangers at a party. Sonia, an 18-year-old, straight African American from NU questioned: "I mean, who really does that? What are they [white women] thinking? They just met this person and already they are hooking up. White women are the crazy ones." Sonia questioned others' behavior based on her own perceptions of how she had been hypersexualized as a black woman, utilizing the measuring stick of the good girl in order to define what was "crazy" or "wild." Based upon these experiences, women of color like Sonia and Casey did not see themselves within the framework of "women gone wild" or bad girls, and therefore questioned why they were seen by society as the more sexualized of the races. Women of color negotiated their subjectivity by using the measuring stick of a good girl image to make sense of their white peers' behaviors. Their negotiations complicated the dominant discourse of female sexuality, something that is set up to

be a binary concept; how others behaved was not only caught up within society's expectations but it was also a reaction to how they saw themselves in comparison to others.

The work of negotiation and the tension among women's own desires, policing others and wanting to feel accepted, was the emotional labor for women as they worked to shape their sexual subjectivities and to define sexual pleasures. Because sexual discourses from early on becomes internalized, peers learn and are socialized to police each other. This sort of policing can only produce shame and confusion and further establish normalized sexual expectations. Furthermore, peers become "authorities" on sex because of how they utilize dominant roles, labels, and experiences to make sense of theirs—and others'—subjectivities.

### **Conclusion**

Determining the nuances of sexual desire and figuring out who to turn to as "sexual authorities" was emotional work for women. Sexual desire became a minefield for women that needed to carefully negotiate in order to avoid missteps, opportunities where they would be judged or shame the family, and/or increase the numbers of sexual partners, etc. How women negotiated conversations in the home and in the classroom complicated how they expressed their sexual desire, a discourse, like Michelle Fine (1988) argued, that was omitted from these discussions. Although some women did admit in their conversations that they could talk to their parents about sex, they still believed that space was not created in the household in order for those discussions to take place. Parents expressed the expectation to their daughters that college would be the place for sexual experimentation and temptations, so therefore they would need to protect themselves and be aware of men who would be sexually aggressive. It is understandable

how this would be confusing to women who were (a) already sexually active, (b) not entirely sure what sex was all about or (c) wanting to act upon their sexual desire but hesitant in making a decision. I found that participants still needed to work to discover other details they felt had been missing from the conversations. Therefore, they needed to negotiate the details they needed to figure out when it came to their sexuality. The more women talked, however, the more the work of their negotiation came through, building upon their sexual subjectivity. Although some participants felt their parents were supportive of their decisions, it was difficult for them to discern what exactly their parents were supportive *of*.

Negotiating familial, educational, and peer discourses in relation to their own sexual desires complicated women's emotional work of sexual decision-making and how they worked to exercise their sexual agency. Trying to grapple with their sexual desires and having to understand others' perceptions of their sexuality made the work complex. Male sexual partners, experienced friends, and older siblings became sexual authorities and women needed to negotiate what they learned from these individuals in accordance with what the participants desired. Because women claimed to have felt left out when it came to formalized sexual education, friends became their primary support network. Women learned about sex through their own personal experiences and mistakes and through other women's mistakes; the focus groups served as an opportunity for participants to reflect and talk out loud about their experiences in order for other participants to make sense of them. In particular, how Lindsey and Kristina talked with each other within the focus group demonstrated how discourse functions and how this sort of talk allows space for women to think through and reflect upon past decisions and current feelings.

When it came to policing of others through labels such as slut or whore, I wondered if women added to the problematics of labeling, or were they simply fulfilling society's expectations?

Women's management of their behaviors upheld social morals and expectations; therefore, being a good girl meant being a gatekeeper of these expectations. In exchange for their sexual decision-making being confirmed or validated by others, the women needed to sacrifice a piece of—or all of—their sexual desire and subjectivity. Whether it was family members, partners, or peers, each of these three groups evoked emotional labor that women needed to endure while they worked to negotiate and maintain dominant discourses relative to women's sexuality.

## **CHAPTER 6. EXERCISING SEXUAL AGENCY WITHIN THE “BUBBLE” OF THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE; NEGOTIATED WORK OF RESISTANCE AND EXPLORATION**

I definitely experienced a lot more in college than I did back home. I had a vague understanding of what queer was when I was home, but then I like came to school and took a class on queer histories; we thoroughly went over like Michel Foucault and his theory and like we went over “queer” and its political meaning and like what sexuality is and so like that really, really helped me come to understand who I am and like what I really want to get out of my sexual identity and like my gender expression. It’s allowed me to appreciate other people’s beauty and like that’s one of the things that allows me to find a broad spectrum of people attractive. I’ve definitely become more proactive and stopping people from saying things like, “That’s gay,” and I think my activism is actually a big part of my sexuality.

—Emma, a 19-year-old, white freshman from NU who identified as queer

College for women can be a site of growth, negotiation, and resistance. The sexual ethos of college life involves the establishing of new relationships, sexual exploration, more options, and exposure to more inclusive coursework and curricula, and, in most cases, being away from parents and out of the home. As discussed in the previous two chapters, women talked about ways in which they negotiated their sexuality at home, at college, with friends, and with their partners. They also came to understand how their sexuality and decisions are regulated by others. Some participants, like Sarah, a 21-year-old, white lesbian from NU, talked about college “as a

safe little bubble,” while others, like Sandy, a white, straight 18-year-old from ULCC, spoke about college as an opportunity to become someone else or to take on an “alter ego” when it came to making sexual decisions. Above, Emma talked specifically about how college shaped the way in which she understood the fluidity of sexual identities, and how she came to understand her own sexual identity and to appreciate others’ identities. By taking college courses with a wider and more inclusive theoretical view of sex and sexuality (i.e., discussion on lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons and experiences), Emma was able to apply what she learned in those classes to the shaping of her own sexual subjectivity. Although women participants in my study had varying levels of sexual experience, many agreed that college was a site where they were able to more fully engage with their sexual subjectivity; to experiment and to explore their sexual identity and pleasures. This chapter will explore how some women talked about college as a “safe bubble” in more detail. What did the college experience offer these women? Why did it take less emotional work for women to explore their sexuality at college than at home? What opportunities does college offer for women to exercise their sexual agency?

This chapter is about how participants saw their universities/colleges providing them space to resist the dominant social discourse and expectations of female sexuality through their understanding of regulation and their work of negotiating those regulations. In this chapter, I will talk about how women were in a better position to exercise their agency at college, a space where they felt safe in exploring their sexual desire and identities while shaping their sexual subjectivities. To be sexually subjective, persons think of themselves as sexually agentic, able to make *active* sexual choices, and they recognize that they are entitled to sexual pleasures as well

as sexual safety. As Moffat (1987) argued, college life postsexual revolution, “was about autonomy, about experiencing college one’s own way, independent of the influence and the intentions of adults.” (p. 34). Women were therefore able to shape their sexual subjectivity in college (a) by exploring their own desire outside the confines of a dominant white, straight context, (b) through programmatic initiatives and services on and off campus (c) by utilizing knowledge gained in college coursework (such as feminist and sexuality courses) in order to explore pleasures and understand their subjectivity, and (d) by identifying better programmatic initiatives in schools and on campus in regard to sexual health. These components are situated within the organizing concept of college as a space where women were able to exercise their sexual agency and resist regulatory expectations.

### **College: A “Bubble” for Sexual Exploration**

Sex at college is almost considered as a “rite of passage” for students. Exploring one’s sexual identity—and having the space in which to do so—has been the expectation of the college experience. For example, the sexual significance of turning 18 and moving out of the family home individualizes the sexual experience and gives parents “permission” to talk to their children (especially their daughters) about sex, arm them with birth control pills, and assume that sex will happen for them the first week on campus (Regenerus & Uecker, 2010). Parents assume that their children will become more self-reliant in college because of the achievements they were able to reach in order to get there: passing entrance exams and graduating successfully from high school. Therefore, college becomes a significant marker on the road to adulthood. In college all aspects of adulthood—including sexual relationships—are thought of as milestones to be

reached (Elliott, 2012). The notion of college as a “bubble” suggests the ability to exercise independence and to explore within a safe sphere. I utilize the term “bubble” as a narrative strategy to emphasize that college provides an opportunity for more unrestrained sexual exploration.

College is a complex site where contradictory messages and women’s sexual experiences meet; a campus is a “sexual arena” where students have easy access to policing (and being policed by) their peers on their sexual decisions, within an institutional context that emphasizes sexuality’s danger but also offers space where student can experiment (Bogle, 2008). However, because straight culture is the dominant culture on college campuses—and in most educational institutions—educational programming and cultural expectations of college life are more focused upon the privileging of male need and desire. In fact, as participants revealed in earlier chapters, college women are still judged more harshly than men for sexual behaviors, and they work to adjust those behaviors to negotiate sexual double standards (Elliott, 2012). For example, in Laura Hamilton and Elizabeth Armstrong’s ethnography of women living in a university residence hall, they discovered how women had difficulty successfully navigating a sexual reality that they did not control; instead, the women found that men still dictated the beginning and ending of a relationship, as well as the sexual course that it took (Regenerus & Uecker, 2010). Furthermore, studies show that men derive more sexual pleasure from hook-ups, as men’s sexual pleasure is privileged over female’s pleasure in sexual encounters; whereas women are believed to feel more of the emotional backlash (Heldman & Wade, 2010).



Therefore, college's programmatic efforts often focus on females as sexual gatekeepers and educate women in how to resist "unwanted" sexual advances, avoid alcohol and other drugs, and be aware of their physical surroundings (Diamond, 2008; Friedman, 2007; Morr & Mongeau, 2004). Through some programming efforts on college campuses, women are taught that their sexual desire will ultimately end in disaster, so they should work to resist those advances to keep their reputation intact or to avoid situations that would result in sexual assault or rape. Lynn Phillips (2000) argues that such educational programming in schools is framed primarily as disaster prevention and control, which affirms for women that it is necessary for them to resist male advances (while not acknowledging the desire of the bisexual or lesbian woman). Such programming does not prepare young women to become empowered *within* their sexual relationships; nor does it address what it might mean for them to say yes to a partner, other than always no. These forms of educational programming suggest that the only way to maintain one's own reputation is for women to "deny, avoid and resist their sexual desires," all within the context of considering one's safety (Phillips, 2000, p. 63). I am not arguing in this study that educating women on the dangers of date rape and sexual assault is wrong; I am simply arguing that when this is the *only* programming that is presented to women, they miss out on the opportunity to understand what giving *and* receiving consent might actually look like.

For the women who resisted regulatory expectations and normalized standards—such as being a good girl—in regard to their sexuality, their emotional work was evident, because the shaping of one's sexual subjectivity is a political, public, contested, and negotiated process. When I talk about women exercising their agency in this study, it means that they chose to make

decisions in accordance with or in resistance to dominant social discourse. Although no decision is free from the influence of social discourse, women exercised their choice to resist, negotiate, and/or abide by social rules. Women also exercised their agency by simply working to *understand* how they were regulated. They were active agents when doing this; or more pointedly, they were sexual subjects when they exercised their agency. One cannot have sexual subjectivity without being able to talk about it—no matter their sexual experience; therefore they worked to negotiate their sexual decisions in alignment with dominant social discourses. For each participant, the act of negotiation, as described in the previous chapter, was about trying to figure out who their authority was on sex. Was it families, partners, educators, or friends? College was the common denominator in this act of negotiation, and many women used their college experience to figure out their sexual identity and subjectivity. Negotiation, therefore, established pathways of resistance through which women could further ground their sexual subjectivity and construct possibilities of improved educative spaces and places.

When I refer to resistance in this chapter, it is not necessarily about women “fighting” back, but more about building upon their sexual subjectivity by setting a personal and pleasurable agenda for becoming a sexual agent. Resistance is relevant to the emotional labor process because women take particular risks in talking back to traditional authority figures such as parents and teachers, becoming politically active on campus, revealing a piece of their identity that goes against dominant social standards, and/or asking for what they want sexually from their partners. All of the examples in this chapter show the risk involved in resisting the good girl image: they could be labeled as “bad” by the dominant society. In fact, by putting themselves out

there as active sexual *subjects* as opposed to *objects*, women stick out like a sore thumb within the overall dominant society where good girls are praised and bad girls are ostracized. Women resist these standards by privileging their own sexual subjectivity above others. What better way for them to do so that through inclusive, consistent, and open education, and by *demanding* it. Often, these women found that they could be their own best educators through peer support, mentorship, and being agents of change in making this happen. Resistance *is* agency.

Resistance is also work. Women are part of a culture that

. . . still considers even a woman's yes to a man's sexual invitation revolutionary. This is a world where women still frequently are not asked for consent, are often raped or coerced, still engage in sex with partners out of feelings of duty or obligation, usually have our sexuality depicted in grossly inaccurate ways by men and other women alike, and independent female sexual desire and earnest sexual enjoyment are not only disbelieved, in some circles, but even "scientifically contested." (Corinna, in Friedman and Valenti, 2008, p. 183)

Therefore, to lay stake to personal sexual claims and desires as a women, whether one identifies as straight, lesbian, queer, gay or bisexual, is in and of itself revolutionary and, in some places, completely unorthodox. But it is always work. This work ends up being women's exploration of sexual identity and pleasures and of making their own decisions, despite the regulatory standards that had been communicated and/or instilled into them in the past. College is a place where women can begin—and/or continue—that work.

### **Exploring Sexual Desire: The Importance of Talk and Experience to Sexual Subjectivity**

When women discussed how they talked about and asked for what they want from sex, I found that a component of women's emotional work was their exploration of what it meant for *them* to be sexually pleased. Talking about sexual experimentation in college for women was an opportunity to establish what sexual pleasure looked like for them, or more specifically, "what turned them on." Part of what it means to complicate and problematize desire is to *name* it, to experiment with a variety of sexual expressions and desires and to figure out what works outside a box that people are shoved into by regulatory dominant social expectations. It was not necessarily about resisting male aggression for these women, but instead resisting the *privileging* of men's sexual pleasure within their sexual relationships and demanding to have their own sexual desires be recognized. Sexual desire for women also included them choosing *not* to have sex because that is what they *wanted* to do, not because it was something they felt they *should* do. This section will discuss how women talked about their desires, the navigation of varied relationships in college for sexual exploration, and how participants framed this talk within their own sexual subjectivity.

According to Michael Moffat's (1989) study on college life, students believed that "they came of age in college thanks to what they learned among themselves on their own" and were "pushed through stages of development in college by the various formal and informal learning experiences that characterized modern undergraduate life" (p. 54). These formal and informal learning experiences provided an opportunity for women to make sense of relationships in a different way than they were accustomed to, whether it was through friends they made, programs they attended, or classes they signed up for. Sexual desire was no longer taboo; it was a topic that

it seemed like everyone was talking about. Some participants spoke about the “culture” of sex in college by comparing it to their high school experiences; they defined sex in college as being more casual, and they mentioned the larger pool of potential partners to choose from compared to that of high school. For example, Penelope, white, straight 20-year-old from CSU explained:

In college, you’re a lot less likely to have that long-term relationship, so it’s more okay to not have a really serious relationship, but have like meaningful sex, and like some sort of connection with somebody not necessarily completely exclusive. When you first get to college, you have that feeling that you’re powerful and you can have sex with anyone you want, anytime you want, and I had that feeling, but told myself, “No I can’t, because of my boyfriend back home. But at the same time, because we never saw each other, it was expected [when we did see each other] that we always had to. That was really not a relationship in the end for me. I’m in a relationship with someone here and it’s so nice to have a relationship that’s not based on or surrounded by sex. It really has changed my view about sex again from the beginning that I’m powerful, I can have sex with anyone at any time to, well sex, is something you do when you’re with your boyfriend, sex is something you do when you want to have sex and there’s someone there who wants to have sex with you.

According to Penelope, college was an opportunity to experiment with relationships, figure out what place sex had within a relationship, and discover what she desired from a sexually intimate—or “meaningful”—relationship. She understood college as a place where less weight was placed on the *expectations* of relationships and more placed upon the meaningfulness of sex

and sexual pleasure within that relationship and what both partners desired. Penelope also expressed the “power” that came along with her revelation; her power was related to her feeling of freedom of being able to sexually explore. College life came with less judgment and more freedom. Women therefore took advantage of that space as an opportunity to reveal sexual pleasures and desires.

Women varied in how they described and talked about their desire; for example, some participants (in comparison to others) realized what it meant for them to feel good and they felt safe in talking about their sexual desire in detail within the focus groups. The focus groups were, in fact, a site for exercising sexual agency and an opportunity for reflection. Group discussions were safe spaces created for women, who all shared an experience in common: being a woman in college. Casey, straight African American from NU who identified herself as a virgin, was detailed and open when talking about her sexuality, behavior, activities, and desires. For example, when talking about sexual pleasure in the groups, she took the opportunity to talk about what turned her on:

I’m a big fan of the nipples, it feels so good, like I’ve said I cum off of [having them touched], and I cum quicker when the boy cums, so like he cums on my butt or like my titty or something like that and I like the way it feels on my body. Which turns me on. I like the way it feels in my mouth, too.

Although Casey had admitted she was a virgin (by defining virginity as not yet having had sexual intercourse), her detailed account of sexual pleasure illuminated a level of sexual activity that some people would not attribute to “virgins” or society’s “good girls.” What does it mean to

label oneself as a virgin and have this level of sexual activity? Emotional work was involved in the negotiation of this question: Does being sexual need to be defined in binary terms of virgin vs. nonvirgin (or “slut”)? Or rather does being sexual mean that one is sexually subjective; an active sexual agent who understands what it means to have sexual pleasure, to say yes or no to sex, and have the ability to talk about it? For these women, college provided a space to talk about it. Casey’s openness allowed for other women in the group to follow suit, also describing what turned them on sexually. Sonia, a straight African American also from NU, talked about sex with her boyfriend:

Sex with him, I don’t know, I enjoy that he appreciates my body. I just like to hear the reactions from my body and such. I kinda like it when he takes control, but I’m also a very aggressive person, so I like when I take control. As far as positions, I like deep strokes.

Like Casey, Sonia was also able to use the open space of the focus group to talk about how she enjoyed sex with her boyfriend. She was able to express the “give and take” of her sexual relationship with her partner, and also what turned her on specifically. While some women were comfortable in being detailed, some other women chose to express themselves in different ways, such as using more “medicalized” terminology to talk about sexual desire, or removing their personal desires from the conversation. For example, Penelope, a straight, white 20-year-old from CSU, talked about sex in relation to biology or the science behind sex, an explanation more separate from her own personal desires:

The part I like about sex is the closeness thing, just the way that your bodies respond to each other, you know, you think about emotion and they're moving in that way that you want it to, and it's a good thing, so um, sexual pleasure to me is more like a connection with a person than the actual, physical, you know, when a tissue's filled with blood?

Your tissues filled with blood and then the blood rushes away, from your tissues, that you know, spreads out to the rest of your body which is what an orgasm is.

Although Penelope was descriptive about sexual desire, she discussed sex in a more biological and emotional context compared to Casey and Sonja. However, participants, no matter how they may have described their desire, found spaces like the focus groups and interviews as an opportunity to openly express what they like and do not like about sex, how they asked for it, and what it meant to have pleasurable sex.

College was a site for exploration for women and where they felt comfortable in dating and sexually experimenting with a number of partners away from parents' watchful eyes. For example, Candy, a straight African American from NU, talked about exercising her sexual agency in how she described her experimentation with sexual activity:

When I was a freshman, you know you dabble and dabble with different people, and you're like 'mmm, I kind of like this but not really' and you know you try something else and it's like 'hmm, I guess I don't like that, you know for me it was kind of like experimenting and having the freedom to do that and not feeling restricted. And once I do, I can figure this is for me or this is not for me. Simply put, the experimenting has



helped me to come understand what I like, what I don't like, my desires...just being able to do it freely and comfortable and not feeling like I'm sneaking around, you know?

In Candy's exploration of sexual partners, she argued that experimentation allowed her to become more comfortable in her sexual decisions. Although not as detailed in her explanation of sexual pleasure as Sonia and Casey, Candy was still able to speak candidly about how relationships in college felt "less sneaky" and was able to experiment more freely within this space. She did not talk about sex within the context of physical touch and exploration, but rather focused more on the act of experimentation and how it had helped her shape her sexual subjectivity. For her, in college it was less work for her to navigate her sexual pleasures and also she didn't have to worry about hiding her activity from parents/guardians. No matter the situation, by asking for and figuring out what turned them on, these women demonstrated sexual desire outside the context of being a good girl.

Engaging in sexual experimentation was about discovering sexual pleasure and being sexually subjective agents. For women participants, college was a site for being able to explore more fully their sexual desires and exercising their sexual agency. Casey, a straight African American from NU, talked about what college had taught her relative to her sexuality:

What college has taught me . . . I guess I learned so much about my sexuality in college, just like it plays, it intertwines so nicely with my identity. Since I was sexually assaulted when I was younger, it's like part of me, you know, I did a lot of discovery and self-evaluations about my sexual being. I do a lot of testing. Well first of all, I figured out what sex was! Because I thought I had it [sex] for the longest time, but really didn't. So

that really helped. But I definitely tested the waters and saw what I like to do and what I don't like to do.

Casey's sexual experimentation was about navigating away from the negative and traumatic experience she had as a child, and utilizing college as a site to figure out her own sexual interests. Casey utilized her agency to figure what sex was all about and think about herself as a sexual subject outside the context of male pleasure. Casey saw herself as a sexual subject because of her ability to experiment, to self-evaluate, and to reflect upon her sexual decisions. Although her experience with sexual assault undoubtedly became part of her overall sexual subjectivity and how she viewed her sexuality and sexual desires, she was able to resist the negativity of the experience to further investigate what can be pleasurable and positive for her. Although she identified as a virgin, her idea of "sex" went beyond intercourse; it instead included bodily pleasures and identity exploration.

Like Casey, some participants talked about experimentation as learning about themselves through their experiences. They spoke about their sexual exploration and past sexual experiences as learning opportunities; past experiences aided in the shaping of their sexual subjectivity. For example, Stacey, a straight Puerto Rican from NU, talked about what it means to be in a sexual relationship in college:

I think I learned a lot about myself. I came out of a relationship and I thought it was supposed to be, that it was to please my boyfriend. But it's not like that. It's not like a one-way relationship and I feel like I've learned in college a lot like it's a relationship is

two ways and sex is like two ways and not only when he's done [climaxing]. I learned about sex and a lot about being in a relationship with someone else.

Stacey, through her current relationship experience in college, understood that a sexual relationship was not just about pleasing the man, but also about what it means for her to understand her own sexual pleasures. Her ability to experiment with other partners and other relationships allowed for her to more fully understand her needs and desires within a sexual relationship. College was consequently a place to experiment and to figure out that being in a sexual relationship included her pleasure, as well. Micah, a 30-year-old, straight African American from NU, also felt that she was able to exercise her sexual agency because of how she learned from past experiences:

I feel that going through these experiences made me more comfortable to know what I want and to be able to ask for what I want and everything's about me now. Everybody's like out of my head right at this point when it comes to my sexuality. So like every decision I make is for me, even if I feel like it's a bad decision.

Because of her past experiences, Micah saw herself being able to separate others' judgments by her negotiation and understanding of a sexual relationship. She said, "Everybody is out of my head," illuminating her work in making decisions more for her rather than for others. Although I argue throughout this study that women worked to navigate particular regulations and experiences in order to shape their subjectivity, I do also demonstrate that these decisions were never entirely free from outside influences. Women might have seen their decisions as being more about pleasing themselves, yet their decisions still emphasized their work at attempting to

separate others' influences and to understand sexuality on their own. Their desire for independence underscored their work in shaping sexual subjectivity and resisting outside influences.

Women taking the position that exploration through experience is not only acceptable but also healthy is a component of this work. For example, Emma, a queer, white 19-year-old from NU, explained her negotiation and resistance fighting against established social stigmas:

There's that stigma of like sleeping with someone the first night but I think that goes back to us...being a puritanical society and just like sex is a bad thing so. So initially that hits me and then I realize, "no wait, I'm a sexual being, I'm allowed to express my sexuality anyway I choose and society cannot tell me how I want to do this". So at first I'm hit with the stigma but then I come through with my own sense of things and I get over it.

Emma "gets over it" by establishing herself as a sexual subject and by exercising her agency when she resists what she has labeled a "puritanical society." Her idea of sexual subjectivity was recognizing that she is a sexual subject and that she is indeed "allowed" to express her sexuality, but not without consequence. Despite her resistance against social norms, Emma still needed to work to negotiate stigmas. Resistance is how she does this; like Micah, her work is also about situating herself outside of a context of others determining her sexuality activities for her; identifying herself as a "sexual being" was another way of saying that she was a sexual agent. Megan, a white, straight 18-year-old from ULCC talked about her decisions as independent or as her "own" in how she took responsibility for them:

I would say to myself honestly, as much as I say, “Oh I’m not going to do this,” sometimes I go and do it. And it’s like, when it comes down to it, it’s my choice, I know it is. I never felt pressured in a sexual situation, which I’m lucky I know, but I would say I make my own decisions. I might not realize the consequences, but when they come around I know I have to deal with them because that’s what I have decided to do.

Megan understood that by taking ownership of her sexual decisions, she also knew she needed “to deal” with any consequences that came from her own decisions. Exercising her sexual agency was her negotiation of an understanding that, despite the situation, the decision was still hers to make. Choices were subject to social forces in the form of peers, partners, and parents. Megan’s thoughtfulness demonstrated her sexual subjectivity and how she saw herself as a sexual agent despite these influences.

Masturbation also served as part of women’s self-exploration and experimentation when it came to sexual desire. Although masturbation has been considered by society as an act that “good girls don’t,” women found masturbation one of the preferred outlets in discovering what they enjoy sexually; it was a skill that helped them to better direct their partners in sexual activities. Skye, a 33-year-old white woman from ULCC who did not identify a sexual orientation, talked about her initial experimentation with masturbation as a way to improve her sex life:

I guess when I first started having sex, I was not really comfortable touching myself, and so I hadn’t really masturbated. It wasn’t until after I had been having sex for a while, I thought, you know, I started to change how I felt about that and feel more comfortable,

and sex definitely gets a lot better when you know, changing the angle might feel a lot better or you know, “What if we try this?” I mean as uncomfortable as it can be to start asking for what you want, most people [partners] are going to look at that positively because if you want to do anything sexual with them, they are usually okay with that.

Although uncomfortable at first, Skye understood her sexual desires through the exploration of *herself* and then applied what she had discovered to exploring her needs with her partner.

Through masturbation, Skye set the standards for her own desire and communicated her desires to her partner and was able to get past the social stigma of masturbation being wrong.

Nicole, a 21-year-old, straight Dominican from NU, also talked about what it meant to please herself through masturbation, not necessarily because it made sex better for her, but because masturbation for Nicole *was* better:

Because I was a virgin for a long time, you know, I kind of experimented with myself, and like masturbated and things like that and for some reason I find I can please myself better than anyone could really please me, and not that I do it all the time, but in the times that I have done it, I’ve gotten an orgasm as opposed to having sexual intercourse with a penis, I probably gotten it once or twice.

Nicole understood herself as the sexual agent in discovering what made her feel good; that she would rather work to please herself than have her partner do it for her. Through this exploration, Nicole worked to identify what felt good to *her*, not what would feel good for her partner.

Although she considered what it would mean to have intercourse provide the same sort of pleasure, her exploration through masturbation gave her an opportunity to explore sexual desire

and a strategy for communicating her sexual desires to her partner. The women became sexually subjective *because* they were talking about it. Even though they may have needed to be prompted by my questions, participants felt comfortable talking through their sexual experimentation in college and what they had learned from this experimentation. Reflecting upon their actions, behaviors, and desires positioned these women as thoughtful and sexually agentic subjects.

### **Finding Safe Space: Programmatic Initiatives and Services on and off Campus**

A component of emotional work for women was seeking out resources, whether in campus centers, within student organizations, or in the classroom, as a process of managing and negotiating their understanding of themselves as sexual agents. There is no doubt cause for concern about the health of our college students. For example, a 1996 study found that 46% of acquaintance rapes occurred when either the man or the woman or both had been consuming alcohol (Lannutti & Monahan, 2002). The percentage has continued to grow over the past 20 years. Studies also suggest that there is a heightened risk for STDs among youth, particularly college students, as there are three million cases of sexually transmitted diseases each year (Flannery & Ellingson, 2003). These statistics have caused colleges to further enhance their health services and educational programming. Many campus health services not only disseminate information on how students can protect themselves, but also provide free condoms and other forms of birth control as well as STD testing and medical assistance (Gmelch, 1998). In addition, student affairs practitioners offer educational workshops that promote healthy relationship

decision-making as well as educating students on the dangers of alcohol use and abuse (1998, Gmelch).

Furthermore, there are resources available on college campuses where women (and men) can be counseled on how to prevent and/or heal (physically and emotionally) from a sexual assault. It is not uncommon for college students today to receive an abundance of information not only on how to protect and educate themselves, but also on where they can find additional resources to deal with consequences that may arise from sexual activity, particularly activity that is unplanned (Patterson, 2008). However, participants in the study talked more about spaces on campus that offered *support* for their sexuality as opposed to simply services that serve to *protect* them sexually.

College offered opportunities and support networks where women could find themselves with other like-minded peers in order to feel comfortable and engage with their identity. Resources such as the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) Resource Center at NU offered space for women to engage with, explore, and question their sexual identity. The center's website describes their mission to provide education, advocacy, support, and safe space for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and straight-allied students, staff, faculty, parents, and alumni of Northeast University. In addition, the center offered educational workshops, trainings, and community events that provided both NU and CSU campuses to get involved in activities, become allies, and take advantage of resources. Johan, in her one-on-one interview with me, talked about how her high school education lacked components that related directly to being a lesbian; but when she began to join clubs and organizations in college that



related to sexual identity, she was then able to find out that “being gay was an available way to live.” Johan, a 19-year-old, white lesbian from NU, talked about her excitement in discovering the LGBT resource center on NU’s campus:

I remember I got an e-mail from the LGBT Resource Center that they were having a BBQ for freshmen and really, I was sooo excited about it, just to have a community. You know I got here and went to those events and the people that I met on those first events became my friends for freshman year, and some of them, we’ve grown apart and some of them we have stayed really close, and it’s just really funny to see how that really made an active space for me here, it’s nice.

Johan felt supported not just by this community, but also by her college because of the resources that they were able to provide. Being able to make those connections her first week on campus was important to her when it came to establishing positive networks that helped in affirming her sexual identity. Kirsten, a white bisexual from CSU, also agreed:

You’ve got the LGBT resource center that throws events like the Big Gay Dance, and it’s a good time, you dance, and you meet people, and you start to, you know, you like this lifestyle if it’s for you, if you’re feeling it, if you’ve got questions.

For Kirsten, the social opportunities provided to her were important, and a way to recognize like-minded peers who shared similar feelings and questions related to their sexual identity. All of these opportunities offered a bigger picture of support for these women, and a way to understand what was going on in the world outside of the more confined space that they had previously experienced.

It took emotional work for college women to move against the normative and gendered binaries of sex. Women who identified as lesbian, bisexual, gay, and/or queer often described their sexuality as fluid; or at times they expressed their sexuality more as a political statement than as something subjective, personal, and intimate. For example, Veronica, a 20-year-old, bisexual Puerto-Rican from NU, explained what she meant by fluidity:

I really believe especially after like all the education that I've received, I feel like sexuality and this goes on to a lot of things . . . it's all fluid, you know what I'm saying? I can't sit here and say well I'm not attracted to girls just because I'm supposed to identify as being straight. Because well I don't identify as being straight or being heterosexual but, it's all fluid, you know. So, I don't even like the term bisexual even though like I have sex with girls and I have sex with guys . . . I don't even like that term because I feel like that's just putting a label on it and I feel like it's different in terms of the law where it's like everybody deserves rights and in order to like get rights you need to be categorized or something, you know, just in terms of the law. But in terms of other things, like I just feel like I am who I am, okay, and yeah I feel like sexuality is a really fluid concept. It's whatever you make it to be. 'Cause either like there are some people who could not have sex at all and that, they have no sexuality where other people might be considered, like I even hate the term hyperactive or hypersexual; because it's like how can you measure how much sex one person has or if it's a lot or if it's not a lot and also you don't ever know like all these terms that are given like how do you qualify under that.

Veronica's last points here were important on the issue of sexual authority and questioning how one person can "measure" the sexuality of someone. But some participants also understood that these regulatory standards limited their sexual agency and their freedom to explore boundaries beyond defined dominant hetero-normative expectations. Veronica, like others, worked to create her own definitions of sexuality and identity. Her concept of fluidity was a way for her to understand how her own sexual desires and subjectivity work. Veronica worked through the process of understanding her own identity by engaging in the emotional work of negotiation and resistance of dominant social norms. Dominant discourse has defined sex as something that is binary, good vs. bad, or an act between a woman and man. But women discovered in college that sex is really more shades of gray than black and white; it is more complex and it takes emotional work to untangle those complexities. Alex, a 22-year-old Southeast Asian from ULCC who identified as gay, also discussed her notions on the fluidity of sexual identity:

I would go far as to say most people are bi until society tells them otherwise, or their family, or the world that they live in tells them to go one way or the other because, you know, we have slowly made leaps and . . . small steps sometimes towards sexual terminology and different variations of sexual identity and it's been a slow process. So yeah, I'm just gay. I think lesbian is very clinical and two-dimensional.

Alex demonstrated her understanding of society's influence on how people consider their sexual identities and sexual subjectivity; she realized that people act in accordance with what the dominant scripts of society tell them to do relative to binary sexualized roles. Although she considered how far society might have come in regard to affirming various sexual identities, she

also believed that there is more work to be done in seeing sexual identities as more fluid and not as “two-dimensional.”

Due to their understanding of sexuality as fluid, resistance for these women often took the form of acts of political engagement and becoming involved with the LGBT Resource Center, and/or joining groups that allowed them to express themselves more fluidly. For example, Beatrix, a white, lesbian 19-year-old from NU, was able to understand the “shades of gray” that existed outside the dominant heterosexist framework through the resources offered at college:

It [college] was the first time that I met queer people. Seeing that they weren't scary, or that we weren't scary, you know? That it was a community that I was okay to be a part of. Obviously having the resources on the queer community helped me come out, helped me, you know, be more open to being who I am.

Having a space that was affirming to Beatrix's sexual identity was important to her in being comfortable with being a lesbian. College provided her the opportunity to develop a community network of support; it was also a place where she was able to hear and be around others who shared her same feelings of confusion as well as sexuality. Spaces such as the LGBT center spoke volumes to students who identified as other than straight, and provided an encouraging environment for students to be out on campus. Due to her comfort on campus, Beatrix talked back to research that always “looked” for problems on college campuses when it came to maintaining a safe space for queer students. She stated:

And honestly, no offense to straight people who do research, but a lot of them portray the queer community as, “Oh you need help!” or “Life is so hostile!” . . . and I think a lot of it, a lot of that research is the problem with research. Like to be completely honest, I’ve read those studies, and I’ve done interviews for people who were conducting those studies, and they all seem shocked, you know that I haven’t really faced that much hostility on this campus.

The fact that Beatrix was in a community where she felt supported and surrounded by like-minded individuals was enough for her to not feel as if she were living within a hostile environment. Although earlier Beatrix had talked about feeling tokenized in the classroom as a lesbian, that experience became overshadowed by more positive ones. College, in comparison to her high school experience, made all the difference to what it meant to have a safe space.

Student organizations that were sponsored by the resource center offered space for others to affirm their own identities and feel more comfortable in being themselves. For example, Brooke, a 21-year-old, white bisexual from NU, talked about her experience at a conference that NU paid for her to attend on behalf of her student organization through the LGBT Resource Center. “It [the conference] was definitely like a spectrum with all different sexual identities, and that conference just really helped me to explore, like I don’t have to be afraid to bring my sexual attraction into relationships.” Through her experience at that conference, Brooke was able to understand that her sexuality counts and that it was validated. Conferences like the one Brooke attended provided cocurricular opportunities where students could not only engage with other students outside their own campus, but also be exposed to additional and varied ways of

thinking, acting, and talking about sexuality and identity. She went on to describe the spectrum, or the fluidity, of the sexual identities that she referred to:

Like I used the broad term *bisexual*, but I don't like having to define it. Because I see it as something where I don't care if the person is male or female, I don't care what race they are or anything like that, like that doesn't bother me at all, like I'm going to pick somebody I love because of who they are and not what they are. So I use that broad term but it's really important to me because I like being part of the LGBT community . . . I don't want to lose sight of who I am because of my sexuality and be like it's okay to be with a man and a woman at the same time. I want to stay true to who I am.

For lesbian and bisexual women like Brooke, it was the community and resource center (and the opportunities the center provided) that helped in affirming their sexuality as viable. Women could build upon their sexual subjectivities via educational and community opportunities, as well as create new organizations and spaces for the purpose of expanding similar discussions and activities.

Again, the issue of class became apparent in how women at NU and CSU talked about opportunities that were available to them compared to their peers at the community college. The LGBT Resource Center was a space that was available to both NU and CSU students; students from ULCC relied on residence hall programming and other activities and organizations that tackled issues of lesbian, gay, and bisexual experiences and sexual health. I found that these centers and the events they sponsored occurred more frequently at NU and CSU; ULCC, being a two-year school and with a newly established residential life program, may have had further

work to do when it came to holding these sort of events on campus. ULCC, as discussed in Chapter 5, was traditionally established as a commuter college where students “drive in and drive out” for classes. Therefore, the college lacked services or departments that would hold programs such as these on campus.

Based on feedback from participants, college culture for women’s sexual health needed to have a stronger supportive foundation where women, staff, and students alike would feel comfortable enough in starting particular movements in regard to female sexuality. For example, performances on college campuses like *The Vagina Monologues* promoted female sexual empowerment and provided women the opportunity to talk openly about sexual desire in an extremely personal way via a very public setting. *The Vagina Monologues*, a play first performed in 1996, launched a social movement intended to bring about global awareness of sexual violence toward women. The production involves mostly student (female) participation, and over 800 productions on college campuses occur annually (Bell & Reverby, 2005). Nicole, a 21-year-old, straight Dominican, talked about the student group at NU responsible for putting on *The Vagina Monologues* each year “as a resource that does sexual empowerment and sexual safety.” Nicole viewed this student group as a resource on campus, not just as a club for student interest and enjoyment; it was a group that worked to educate students and serve as a resource for sexual health on campus. Casey, a straight African American, also talked about the educative component of *The Vagina Monologues*:

Nobody ever really talked about the vagina. Nobody told me like, Oh yeah, this is what happens, it’s for sexual pleasure. And it’s like, Oh there’s a hole down there. Somebody

told me like there are three holes you have. And I was just like, huh? I wish someone would have explained it to me. And then I did *The Vagina Monologues* and I was like, Oh, I get it now. Now I'm more interested in knowing.

Casey's thoughts were similar to what I had heard throughout the discussions from other participants; her confusion over having "three holes" and exclaiming, "I just wish someone would have explained it to me" were not unique to Casey. Have the opportunity to become involved in *The Vagina Monologues* allowed Casey, as well as her other "cast mates," to explore her body further in a pleasurable way and with a deeper understanding of her sexual subjectivity.

Some other events women became involved in allowed them space to speak openly about a traumatic sexual experience, such as sexual assault and/or rape. For example, the nationwide program "Take Back the Night" is an evening devoted to speaking back against sexual violence against women, bringing attention to the cause as well as providing a public space for women to speak openly about their experiences. Such talk is not only empowering, but it allows women to find comfort in numbers; in other words, it gives women a chance to hear from other women who have had similar experiences. For example, Stacey, a straight Puerto Rican from NU who had experienced sexual assault in the past, said:

I went to the Take Back the Night and it was like all these people talking about it [sexual assault] and things like that and I was like, "Wow." Since I didn't want to talk about it or deal with it, like I didn't know that there was a place that people can go, to talk about rape and things like that. The advocacy center on campus is a really good thing to have



on campus, like they teach you a lot so I want to get involved now that I'm more like, "Okay, I can talk about this, this happens to other people."

Through this program, Stacey was not only able to hear from others that they had shared her experience, but she was also exposed to other resources on campus that would be able to provide her a place to go for counseling and/or support; most importantly, it provided her an opportunity to educate and empower other young women like herself when it came to talking about the realities of sexual assault and rape. Women performed emotional work to share these traumatic experiences and dialogue within college spaces opened up these opportunities.

Women of color, no matter how they identified, turned to peers within their community (e.g., student organizations, off-campus parties, community events) who were not white and who understood the complexities of being a woman of color on a predominantly white campus. For example, Lindsay, a Latina from NU who did not give a sexual orientation, talked about her understanding of the racial and historical construction of sex and the hypersexualized person of color as a way of understanding and recognizing what it meant to be a person of color and to be sexual. She said:

I'm specifically thinking about slavery when I'm saying that like black sex and black sexuality was seen as something deviant. It was seen as like the complete opposite to like white sex, so it's like white people just have sex to procreate but it's like black people have sex because, you know, we are trying to get it on so there was that whole like allure for the master to have sex with his slave. I mean it's like a running theme if you think about it. Like ohmigod, it's a black savage and he's trying to take the white woman and

not make her pure anymore. So it's just like if you are brown, you're from a foreign place where people have sex like crazy. Because they know white people don't do that. Which they do, they have more sex than like, I mean black people have sex, but not like white people.

Lindsay's understanding of historical influences upon the sexual subjectivity of people of color came alive within our focus groups. Her strong intentions of understanding her own sexual desires and subjectivity caused her to create a measuring stick of the sexual activity of people of color and how much she understood that white people have sex based on her current experiences. Furthermore, how she understood "white" sexuality in comparison to the assumptions made about the sexual behaviors of people of color, are framed within the context of a person of color being hypersexual. She pushed back against this concept when she said, "Black people have sex, but not like white people," implying that the sexual behaviors of white persons is not as innocent as they are presented within a dominant framework.

Through the conversations within the focus groups, women of color found solace with each other. They could openly discuss—and resist—experiences they shared at college. For example, I found that dancing—whether at parties or clubs—was talked about in a sexualized context in the women of color focus groups, and also served as a conversational site of how they understood resistance. According to white dominant culture, blacks and Latinos are deemed to have "sexy social dances, and [anyone] performing their dances is seen as . . . sexualizing themselves through dance" (Hanna, 2010, 226). For some participants, dancing served as a strategy to exercise their sexual agency and to demonstrate control over men who were typically

seen as aggressors. College life provided a number of opportunities for those who participated in dance parties to explore the fluidity of dominant sexual roles. For example, Casey and Lindsey talked about “breaking someone” at parties on campus, a type of dance that was meant to exhibit control over another dance partner to see who could last the longest on the dance floor or keep up with particular dance moves. Through this dance, sex was viewed as a “competition” positioned within a hetero-normative framework. Lindsay talked in the focus group about how she needed to have control when it came to sex, and being able to “break” someone during dancing, or resisting the male partner who was trying to “break” her, was her way of exhibiting this sort of control. She talked about what it meant to have this power play between a man and a woman on the dance floor:

Whenever I see like a good visual representation of a woman who doesn't have agency or control of the situation then I'm uncomfortable with it and it's not okay with me. But that's because I'm more like, Okay we need to level this out and kinda like have a balance of power. So I feel like if I'm not getting mine then you're definitely not getting yours.

So dancing, or “breaking,” to Lindsay was more about exhibiting power and control; sex no longer was about emotion or intimacy, but instead it became a competition and a power play between the two people involved. Lindsay worked to resist male sexual aggression within a hypersexualized context; to redefine her objectivity and become subjective within this context. She emphasized her agency when it came to dancing or sexual activity; that having agency was important to her, and dancing was an opportunity for her to exercise that agency. Casey agreed:

“When a girl breaks a boy, it’s always fun.” Casey understood that a girl breaking a boy was a reversal of sex roles on the dance floor. College life was a playground for both women and men to experiment with and negotiate traditional sex roles outside—and within—a hetero-normative context. Furthermore, the dance floor was also a site for women to see their agency as an opportunity to operate more control over their partners and be in charge of their sexuality. Casey and Lindsay saw dancing as an opportunity to resist and push back against traditional norms.

Because dance and sex both involve the use of the body, and they both express the body’s orientation towards sexuality, it can be hard to separate dance and sex from one another. For example, Candy, a 21-year-old, straight African American, talked about how she “just wanted to dance at parties” without men hitting on her or bothering her, or, as she put it, “wanting to get with her.” She continued:

I should just dance because I don’t really care what people think, but when you go to a party, you go there to dance, and so I feel like that’s what I do go to the parties because I enjoy the music.

Here, Candy resisted the idea that dance was just about how she positioned herself as a sexual object among her peers; instead she looked to position herself as a sexual agent who saw dancing as pleasurable for *her*, not for anyone else. Candy was determined to demonstrate a “knowingness” about herself that transcended the marginalized boundaries of hypersexuality and regulation. It was easy to see how dancing and sexuality cross-cut the same framework of sexual desire and pleasure; much social dancing is a carrier of fantasy that permits sexual expression and allows the space for women to be sexual without the risk of being labeled (Hanna, 2010). By

Candy claiming that she “just wanted to dance” she worked to avoid being labeled hypersexual or a “whore” for enticing men onto the dance floor with gyrations and bodily movements that often make up the dancing that youth perform. Instead, women like Candy can express themselves through dance, being able to more freely respond to their sexual desires. As the young writer Erin Aubry argues in Ophira Edut’s book, *Adios, Barbie*, “Let’s face it. Sophistication is one of those black stereotypes, like dancing prowess that is not entirely bad. It implies a healthy attunement to life, a knowingness” (1998, p. 27). As an active sexual agent, Candy worked to shape her subjectivity and to resist dominant social norms. By claiming dancing as something that was pleasurable to *her* regardless of its sexual connotations, Candy’s emotional labor of redefining these social norms became clear. Although her agency was still complicated because of how dance and women of color can be sexualized, her being able to ask for a space where she “can just dance” without being eroticized by others is an example of her pushing back against behavior that is typically taken for granted in her experience.

### **The Power of Peer Mentorship and Utilizing Agency to Educate Others**

Some women I spoke with played the role of teachers, educators, and peer mentors for their friends and were designated as the “go-to” people for their friends when it came to sexual education. These women were often identified—or identified themselves—as mentors based on others’ assumptions of their sexual knowledge, or that they appeared to their friends to be the most sure of themselves sexually, or demonstrated their confidence in their openness to talk and their knowledge of sexual desire and pleasure. These women often volunteered to be part of high

school peer mentor programs; they became authorities on sex to “fill in holes” that had been left empty by previous education.

For example, some women talked about the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program, an initiative that was a component of the Advocacy Center at NU, open to both NU and CSU students, as a positive peer-leadership program on campus that served to educate others. The mission of the Advocacy Center is to provide support and advocacy for students who have been impacted by sexual and relationship violence and engage students and the campus community in dialogue about violence prevention. MVP trains students to facilitate conversations with their peers about what they can do to prevent sexual, relationship, and other forms of interpersonal violence. Because of its focus on the peer education piece, women found the program to be particularly helpful. Casey, a straight African American from NU, talked about her experience being in such a group:

I like the MVP program; they go to classrooms specifically to talk about sex and then they talk about relationship abuse. Like what's a healthy relationship, what's a nonhealthy relationship, and what the signs are. Like the best thing I ever did was be a volunteer [for the Advocacy Office] just because, it's just like, it . . . helps so much. Like it helped me so much and being involved . . . it's just so much easier. Like the boy I'm involved with, he's involved with that too. I feel like because I was sexually assaulted, like I have to tell a boy I like, “Oh my god this happened to me, but it's not a big thing because he already knows!”

Being a part of this program was not only good for Casey because of the work she was doing for others, but also because of how it made her confront her past experience with sexual assault and enabled her to share this experience with others. Marisa, a white, straight 19-year-old from ULCC, also talked about her experience with peer-mentorship programs in high school and their benefits:

As a peer advisor, you would go around classrooms, talk about sex, how to perform safe sex...and all the different things out there . . . birth control, morning after pills, what could happen when you're having sex, being pregnant, and all that stuff. And that definitely helped me I think be a lot more open about sex. 'Cause we talk about it.

Marisa also talked about her experience with sexual assault as a young girl (much like Casey) later on in our interview. For both Marisa and Casey, their opportunity to be peer educators for others did not just allow them to be more open about sex and talking about sex, but it also allowed them to come to grips with their own past experiences with sexual assault; having the ability to reflect upon—and then share—their experiences with others was not only therapeutic for them; these women were able to apply their work in other areas and benefit other young women working through similar experiences.

Some women who were not involved in peer mentor programs considered themselves *informal* mentors to younger women. For example, Candy talked about how she reached out to freshman students to talk to them about sex, a topic that normally had not been talked about in their homes: “I want to reach out to these freshmen and open their mind to it [sex] and let them know it’s okay to talk about it, you know, it’s not a forbidden thing anymore.” Women

gravitated toward opportunities to impart knowledge to others. As college women, they understood that their awareness on the subject had been expanded because of how their subjectivity became shaped.

### **College Course Curriculum and Classroom as a Pathway to Subjective Exploration**

College curricula also supported a more inclusive view of female sexuality, thereby attracting women who wished to expand their limited knowledge of sex and sexuality. Through these courses, women were able to “fill in” what they had missed in their previous educational experiences. Women at all three sites were able to take college courses of their choosing. Education at college, and the freedom to take an array of courses outside the dominant spectrum of reading, writing, and arithmetic, was an opportunity to shape sexual subjectivity for women—as well as men—to resist against normalized standards. Students could take college classes to gain knowledge and perspectives that they could use to resist social dominant norms, expand beyond familiar confines, and at the same time learn more about themselves as sexual subjects. For example, Veronica, a 20-year-old, bisexual Puerto Rican explained:

I have to tell you, my friends, I would say all of them are extremely intelligent, okay. We're all rebels in some way, shape, or form. Nothing about us I guess embodies dominance. So, for example, so, I have John who he's a white (laughs) gay man, um, and he's an anthropology major with a double minor in forensic science and LGBT studies. So John is all about culture and he wants to know about relationships with, between people and like and between people and cultures and then also people in systems and how they all connect. I'm a double major in women's studies and sociology with a minor in



forensic science. So, I guess you could say the same thing but from a different standpoint.

I'm all about systems and people and groups and blah, blah, blah.

Veronica understood her own and her friends' resistance as acts of educating themselves on particular topics that went outside the hetero-normative dominant discourse, such as enrolling in LGBT studies and women's studies. Coursework in college offered a more inclusive view on sexuality as well as an opportunity for women to exercise their sexual agency.

For example, women from NU and CSU talked frequently about the course on human sexuality that was offered at NU, claiming that it was a course that "everyone should take." It took up topics they believed should be addressed earlier than college. For instance, the course catalog at NU described the class as addressing "broad areas of human sexuality; the developmental and social aspects of sexuality as developed within the individual and within relationships; multicultural and multiethnic aspects of human sexuality; and those aspects of sexual behavior which represent alternatives to conventional behavior." Micah, a 30-year-old, straight African American from NU, talked about how the course not only helped expose her to other ways of thinking about sexuality outside of a dominant context, but also allowed her to become more in touch with herself sexually:

It was just like [talking about] different parts of my body that was touched that wasn't . . . just like, you know, hands rubbed across it. It was actually, "Touch right there" because that's a pleasure spot that I didn't know anything about and so that was more of when I really understood what the instructor was saying. It was put into action, it was just not a word, Oh, this is what he [the instructor] meant by this. Or his penis doesn't have to be

this big for satisfaction because most of my pleasure areas aren't really close anyway, you know! So it was more of a feeling of it, I actually had to experience it to understand what he was talking about. I can definitely see that when you are in tune with your body, you get more pleasure out of it.

Micah matched her education within the course to her sexual experiences in order to understand what made her feel good. Before this course, she was not able to identify where her “pleasure spots” were and therefore was not able to tell her partner what would satisfy her sexually. For some women, this self-discovery was done through masturbation; however for Micah, her self-exploration was done through her understanding of what she was taught in class. Women were more able to accurately describe and outline their wish list simply *because* of what they had been able to experience and become exposed to in college. Although some women may have felt that they were on different levels of understanding of what sex was all about (some women may have felt more educated, while others may have felt that they still had some exploration to do), participants viewed their experience at college as an eye-opening one, despite some of the limitations that they needed to negotiate.

For some participants, college coursework was a site for figuring out their sexuality. In these classrooms, they were able to see their sexual identity as viable, healthy, and pleasurable. For example, Emma, a white 19-year-old from NU who identified as queer, viewed her sexual identity more as a political statement; therefore, how she identified in a less binary way was an act of resistance to having her sexuality fit into a neatly categorized box that had been constructed by the dominant society. She stated:

I've really come to appreciate that I can express my gender without conforming to the binaries. So I can have short hair and wear a dress and that's okay. I can be masculine one day and I can be feminine another day. I appreciate that a lot, and I think my activism is actually a big part of my sexuality.

Emma, in her work to resist social norms, saw her sexuality rather as something that *was* more fluid, an array of choices that was set along a varied sexual spectrum, instead of an identity that fit within neat boxes. She continued about her involvement as an activist on campus:

I'm very active in the community and fighting for all kinds of rights. I think that like expressing my sexuality that way has affected me 'cause I feel empowered by it. So I've been getting more involved on campus, like I'm really interested in feminist theory, I took a feminist theory class this semester. I'm taking more women gender studies next semester, so like a lot of who I am gets expressed through the classes I take, what I get involved in volunteer-wise. My sexuality is definitely something that is very apparent to everyone. Like I don't try to hide it.

Women like Emma utilized the college classroom space as an opportunity to ground and build upon their sexual subjectivity. Being an activist was emotional work for Emma but it was work that embodied advocacy and passion for her beliefs. The college classroom was also a site that encouraged exploration of careers where being sexually agentic was at the core. For example, some participants wished to make sex the focal point of their future career and/or work.

Veronica, a 20-year-old, bisexual Puerto Rican from NU, talked about her aspirations for the future:

My goal in life is to become a lawyer and that way I can work with like women's issues and like not only just women's issues but . . . okay so my goal in life probably best described is like I want to be Superwoman or like Wonder Woman. But not the sexually objectified Wonder Woman. But Wonder Woman like the concept of her and basically . . . I'm interested in not only like helping woman but helping people of color or who identify of something other than heterosexual and things like that. Because it's funny that now that I'm a sociology major it's like, you know, when you're in like Soc 101 and you learn that like white men, heterosexual men are like the top of the totem pole.

Veronica's passion was driven not just by her recognition of men's place in dominant society, but also her sexual agency to encourage women to speak up for themselves, to stake a claim in who they are, and for her to help defend those who are not able to do so. Although she did not identify a *specific* career, she could talk about her interest and passion in what that work should take up. Much like Veronica, Kristina, a straight Puerto Rican from NU also aspired to help others, such as women who have been victims of rape and sexual violence:

I've always been very passionate about it [rape and sexual assaults]. Actually that's what I plan on doing in my line of work. To work with women that live on military bases or that have a really strong military influence. Like there was this base in Puerto Rico where so many things happened and all of a sudden all these kids were having sex all the time and having babies left and right and I was like, "Why?" Prostitution on military bases all over the world is common, and so many women just get raped around those sites or

because of war. I think that's probably what I want to do is to create a shelter for rape victims from war, etc.

Kristina's passion for helping women who have been sexually assaulted and/or raped represented her resistance against a culture that privileges male sexuality, prostitution, and women as sexual objects. Engaging with her sexual agency, she realized that the shaping of her sexual subjectivity was not just about her, but also about what it means to help other women.

Whether they served as peer mentors, educators, or advocates, women resisted a dominant heterosexist culture that privileges men's sexuality and heterosexist culture within a framework that is predominantly white. Therefore, women worked to make additional spaces to help others—as well as themselves—embrace their sexual agency, find their voices, and make space for productive and thoughtful conversations about sex and sexuality through problem-solving advocacy movements and exploring ideas for future careers. To assist women in this work, college curricula, career centers, advocacy groups, internships, and cocurricular experiences can be sources of information and education about possible career choices.

### **Asking for a More Inclusive Sexual Education Curriculum in Classrooms and on Campus**

Although college life offered a space of less regulated exploration and more inclusive education, all participants agreed that they wished some particular topics and components had been covered earlier, such as the emotional “aftermath” of sex, the experience of being a lesbian or bisexual, and/or affirmation of women's sexual pleasure. The college experience had widened their perspective on the possibility of what educational curricula could incorporate. Throughout the conversations, women spoke about what they would like to see if they were in charge of

sexual education curricula in high school or college by reflecting on their own past experiences. Although they understood college as a site that offered more opportunities for sexual exploration and education—whether it was through courses, more open dialogue among peers and staff, and/or a supportive place where one could more safely express one’s sexual identity—they still identified ways in which institutions of education could improve their curriculum to be more inclusive of women’s sexuality, desire, and sexual health.

Participants agreed that having an understanding of how sexual desire works early on in education would be helpful. The women wanted to have women’s sexuality validated and recognized in sexual education; to have their pleasure recognized would help them more fully understand and make sexual decisions. Building upon sexual subjectivity by asking for improved sexual education curricula *is* resistance; women exercised their sexual agency by pushing back against hetero-normative sexual curricula that provide a narrow view, in their perspective, on sexuality and, in particular, women’s sexuality and desires. The focus groups and interviews may have been the only area in which participants were given an opportunity to define and to ask for better education; yet the fact that they could point at and identify education’s shortcomings was an exercise in sexual agency and resistance in itself. Women were able to not only identify the shortcomings of their sexual education, but also to recognize the ways in which the curricula, programs, and spaces for dialogues could be improved. When discussing these improvements within the groups, participants became passionate about ways in which they could be helpful in these efforts. Ultimately, their resistance was not about ignoring educational initiatives, but about being an active agent in improving education.

For example, towards the end of a discussion, participants were asked a question: “If you were to create your own sexual education curriculum, what would it look like?” Their answers, although varied, carried similar themes. Alex, a 22-year-old, gay Southeast Asian from ULCC, declared:

I would have liked to see my middle school have more of a discussion of what girls are allowed to say, like basically can say whatever they want, be open, demand, you know, whatever they want, their perspective is valued, their mentality is valued, their emotions are important. And that never got addressed in my school.

Alex’s curriculum “wish list” focused on a less male-privileged and heterosexist view on women’s sexuality. She asked that curricula instead recognize and affirm women’s sexual desires, emotions, and concerns as valid and something that should be taken seriously by educators. Although participants’ school curricula varied—depending on whether they attended parochial, private, or public schools—they all felt limited by the education they had received. Women also advocated for the emotional “aftermath” of sex being addressed in school curricula, and they thought it was important for instructors to explain how emotion becomes attached to intimate relationships. For example, Isabelle, a straight, white 18-year-old from ULCC, described her experience in a sexual education class:

We only talked about sex in health class really, for only two weeks. And I just think that they should talk more about like the feelings involved with it, not just, “You can get STDs, you can get pregnant. And that’s it, that’s all that comes from it.” No, there’s a lot more involved.

Isabella's work was her discovery of what had not been covered in class and that the importance of taking notice of the emotional connection that comes with sex was paramount. Mary, a white, straight 18-year-old from ULCC, also talked about what it would mean for a curriculum to be more inclusive of emotions and expectations of the "aftermath" of sex:

I wish I knew that it was okay to not be scared, but to be nervous, to not expect that your partner is going to expect that you know everything, you know? To learn as you go, I think that's what I wish I knew. I think the first time I went into sex, I was like, "Ohmigosh, I'm supposed to know how to do this, I have no idea what's going to happen," and I think it's, people just need to be put at ease about it. I think that's a big part of it. That you just have to realize a lot of live and learn experiences, but you need to know the consequences and what can happen.

Although Mary felt that people have to experience sexual relationships in order to learn from them, she also wished that someone would have been there for her (whether that was a parent, counselor or teacher) to affirm and recognize her anxiety about a first-time experience, to prepare her a bit more for the experience. Kirsten, a white, bisexual 20-year-old from CSU, also agreed that becoming sexually active is challenging when you have little knowledge about what sex means and/or how you behave:

I didn't know much about sex when I came to college. Like I said, I only tried it once, the summer before I came [to college], and it's tough out there especially when you come to college and you don't have your parents to tell you about these things and you're real



inexperienced, and you don't know what you are doing, and that's how a lot of girls end up pregnant. I feel that there should be more awareness in high school about it.

Both Mary and Kirsten wished that they had had a better understanding of not only the consequences of sex, but also what it meant to be in a sexual relationship. Their inexperience instilled a particular fear in them that felt could have been diminished by a more comprehensive approach to educating youth on sex. Renee, a white, straight 18-year-old from ULCC, also talked about the “awkwardness” of her first experience, and wishing that someone “in authority” had prepared her for it:

I know it's kind of impossible, but I wish that someone taught you like, when you know you're ready for it. Like I don't know, because we were both virgins and it was really, really awkward and I wish that someone could have warned me of like the awkwardness that was going to come with it, that it wasn't like how everyone thinks in the movies, like oh, “You meet, you date, you fall in love,” and it's all passion from there and you just know because your passion drives you. But no, it's awkward because you're dating and then it's like, so have we been dating long enough that we can have sex now? Do we buy condoms? So maybe tomorrow we just hang out or something? We'll just do it? Like it's so awkward, it was so awkward.

Renee's work of trying to understand and negotiate what she had seen “happen in the movies,” in comparison to her own feelings, influenced her to consider how she had been educated in regard to having sex for the first time. Her understanding of sex not being “all about passion” but something that can be awkward and nerve-racking reflects her lack of education and lack of

preparedness to become sexually active. By calling for a more expansive curriculum, she demonstrated her resistance to a narrow view of sex education. The women's inquiry and suggestions about how curriculum becomes shaped brought up the following questions: What does it mean to be "ready" for sex? How does the rite of passage of the college experience disrupt how sexual decisions become constructed? How can educators be more intentional in how they answer questions about sex and sexuality in the classroom? Recognition and affirmation of a more inclusive view of sexual identities and pleasures can help not only answer these questions but provide the space for both young men and women to ask them within classroom and educative spaces.

Towards the end of the discussions, women drew on their past to describe and ask for more spaces to be created on campus, such as spaces for dialogue sessions, centers, and/or programs that would provide a "judgment free space" for talking openly about sex with other women. For example, Vicky, a 21-year-old Dominican from NU who did not identify her sexual orientation, stated:

Like there should be big brother, big sister mentoring or something . . . safe space that you can go to and just ask questions, get some condoms, find out about birth control.

People [sexual authorities] say that it is okay, but you know they look at you funny in the nurse's office. You can't talk to your mom, you can't talk to your sister, there has to be that safe space where you know you can go, everybody is there for the same reasons.

They're not going to judge you and you can just ask questions freely and get the advice you need. Without judgments, like that's a very important thing. And if we had that for

sexual health and sexuality, identity, whatever, it would help so many people out, and we wouldn't have to go out there and experience it in order to understand it. Or learn about it. Because I feel like that's what a lot of people do, including myself. I go out there, and I experience it, in order to learn about it and see how I feel about it.

Rather than women "going out there to experience" sexual encounters, Vicky recommended a space where women could be heard more inclusively about sex and to have their questions answered with no judgment in order to assist in decision-making and also attend to particular concerns and incidents. Although the advocacy center on campus is symbolic of what Vicky is referring to, there are colleges, such as ULCC, that do not necessarily have these sorts of centers on campus, nor the funds to necessarily support these spaces. Vicky emphasized the importance of having these centers be free of judgment, so that women would feel comfortable in expressing their innermost concerns and questions. Other women also gave advice on what they would tell women younger than them when it came to sex. For example, Mary, a white, straight 18-year-old from ULCC, advised:

I guess not making it [sex] such a hush-hush topic, you have to just make everyone understand that it's not something to be taken lightly, that it is really a huge deal. That's the main thing is just making kids understand that it is a huge deal. And if there are places to go if you had questions, or if you are in trouble, or if you need something, just making it so not so on the down low. Like it's something no one wants to talk about and . . . but I don't think talking about it is promoting it. It's two different things, like making

people aware is way different than being like, “Oh go out and have sex,” you know what I mean? It’s not the same thing.

Mary felt that if sex was not such a taboo topic and if teachers and parents alike would be able to more openly talk about sex, and therefore also answer questions and concerns, youth would feel more comfortable in also not hiding their questions, experiences, and worries from others; that they would feel more informed in their decision-making and perhaps be more hesitant in participating in an activity they understood they were not ready for. As more young women seek pleasure and agency, adult anxiety over female sexuality heightens, creating a panic over female sexuality with the realization that the gatekeeper role might be turned on its head (Elliott, 2012). To have any shift in a gendered social role disrupts people’s ideological notions of how the world should be. Thus, women worked to negotiate these roles and respond with their own anxiety over how they should be behaving or acting sexually based on how others might perceive them. Women realized that they are missing out on specific information that might have been withheld from them in response to this panic. Yet, they insisted that, armed with this knowledge, their decisions might go differently and with more confidence in what *they* wanted as opposed to feeling pressured to do what others might want. Megan stated:

I would want more girls to be more aware of like, you know, pay attention to statistics, they are true, you know, even if you think something is not going to happen to you, don’t write it off as if it is not a possibility. I would have never imagined that my first time having sex was going to go that horribly. So I guess making girls more aware of everything that can really happen and then . . . having guys be more responsible.

Megan, like Mary, also believed in not only raising more awareness among women about the positives and negatives about sex, but also emphasizing men's responsibility within that education, instead of placing significant blame on women as sexual gatekeepers. All of these suggestions came from a place where women had the opportunity to be reflective, to explore their sexuality in more depth, to become more subjective in their decisions and think beyond normative standards that they have consistently worked to negotiate. I am not implying that women did not necessarily think about these things prior to college, but simply arguing that college allowed for thoughtful engagement with what women have learned, talked about, and grown from in regard to their sexual experiences and how they came to understand themselves as sexual subjects.

### **Closing Thoughts on Sexual Agency and Resistance in College**

I understand that we all perform emotional labor when it comes to resisting particular expectations that have already been established for us, whether we resist expectations of what it means to be a good teacher, an involved parent, or a sexually active youth. Despite the fact that college has its own confined boundaries and regulations, participants talked about college as a place to move past binaries, whether by thinking about sexual identities as more fluid or by thinking about their race as situated in a historical context with political and social influences. College was an opportunity to explore and affirm their subjectivity and not lose sight of who they are and how this contributes to their overall sexual subjectivity. Whether it was through student organizations, college courses, or programs like *The Vagina Monologues*, women understood college, for the most part, to be a safe “bubble” for exploring who they were

sexually. These women were able to educate themselves on the possibilities of identity, like what it means to be a lesbian or bisexual, that went beyond the heterosexist norm; despite friends' and other "authority's" judgments, they found ways to find and define their own pathways for exploring and affirming their sexual subjectivities.

College was a space for less regulated talk, open dialogue, and freer spaces for reflection and exchange of opinions. Colleges pride themselves on their higher learning, solving of world problems, and developing of future leaders. In fact, colleges encourage the subjectivity of learners not just sexually, but also as leaders, managers, teachers, and entrepreneurs. Higher education cements the idea of independent thought and emphasizes the importance of agency for the success of its students. College life was not without its complexities; however it was a space for exploration, experimentation, and the exchange of ideas and thoughts within its community, allowing students to shape themselves as active agents and as thoughtful, subjective beings.

## CONCLUSION

It's so simple. If someone, specifically [my adoptive mother] had said, if you're ever uncomfortable, you come and talk to me. 'Cause that would have saved me. Hours of therapy, probably, many hours of self-hatred, depression, self-harm . . . Yep. If someone had just said, "If you're uncomfortable, if someone touches you, if someone says something that you don't like, you come to me, you come to so-and-so . . . you talk to whoever you like. And we'll make it stop. And that would have been the simplest thing. But I get it, no mother thinks that anything bad is going to happen to their kid.

—Alex, 22, a Southeast Asian from ULCC who identified as gay, in response to a question about what she wish she had known about sex when she was younger.

At this point in my data collection, I realized that I was doing more than just a research project and that its purpose went beyond collecting data and writing it up to become a dissertation. This project provided participants the space not just to open up and talk, but also to *listen* and be *listened to*. What Alex said here completely solidified this notion for me. The power of reflection through talk is conducive to thoughtful sexual decision-making and the shaping of women's subjectivity; in fact, the key to the success of the focus groups was providing this space for reflection. Talking about sex is instrumental to shaping women's subjectivity; to be sexual does not mean acting on desire, being promiscuous, or even *wanting* to have sex. Being a sexual agent means that women—in this discussion—are able to take advantage of the open space to talk about sex, to be thoughtful in their emotional work, and to negotiate the complexities it offers.

How I talked about the concept of emotional labor in this study was helpful in exploring the ways that women came to make sexual decisions, the level of thoughtfulness and work that was involved, and how we (as educators) might help to fill in the blanks, clear up contradictory messages, and help women to fully identify who they are sexually and make decisions based on what is best for them physically, emotionally, and mentally. Women's emotional labor was ever present in these conversations; yet, after they were able to reflect on how they engaged in this work through their decision-making, women saw how these conversations were a key component of how they understood their "stories" and their sexual subjectivity.

***Findings from the talk; Reflections on understandings of regulation, negotiation, and resistance***

In this dissertation I argue that the desire for women to have sex is not just about the need to have sexual contact, but it is the desire to *be* sexual and to recognize oneself as a sexual subject. It is also, to realize that there are particular sexual behaviors, activities, and partner attributes that turn women "on" and create their desire to be sexual with someone; and that to be sexually subjective, women need to perform emotional work. For example, Michelle, a 30-year-old, straight African American woman from ULCC, talked about her sexual desire:

It's an empowering feeling to be able to express my sexual desires and primarily express myself to my partner, like this is what I like, this is what turns me on. To me, that creates the intimacy that allows for our sex to be better, 'cause it verbalizes what I like, and he can tell me what he likes, and then from there that just creates that [uninhibited] environment.



Michelle was empowered to openly express herself sexually to her partner; not just to *tell* him what turns her on, but also to be able to identify what her pleasure looked like. Michelle's having this agency made sex "better." It is not that one must necessarily recognize oneself as sexual in order to *be* sexual; it is rather the understanding that women desire to be recognized—as well as heard—for the work they do as a sexual agent.

As discussed in Chapter 4, I found that some women needed to first experience their sexual subjectivity as *being* regulated before they could talk about negotiating and resisting those regulations; while some other women did not necessarily talk about their resistance to social expectations in regard to female sexuality, but rather continued to negotiate ways in which they could maintain being a good girl and uphold dominant social roles. The women in my study, depending upon the context and the situation, took up each of the different forms of emotional labor within their talk at varied times. How women understood forms of emotional labor was shaped by the social context in which they worked to understand, negotiate, and resist. For example, women might have talked about how they feel that their sexual decisions are regulated by their family members, while in the next statement they talked about how they wish to take a course on sexuality and women's studies in school in order to take back their ownership of education and exercise their sexual agency. All talk included some component of their work in understanding, negotiating, and resisting.

In the fourth chapter, I also talked about how participants came to recognize their work in negotiating what they had and had not been taught in sexual education, in the home, and within the confines of one's bedroom—to point out what has been missing in their knowledge on

sexuality all along and how their lack of knowledge on the topic was a form of regulation set by dominant ideological standards. Despite these limitations, I found that women in my study were able to recognize their emotional work through thoughtful interrogation of how they had been regulated by dominant discourses. They also reflected upon what it means to be a woman who is a desiring, sexual subject within a white, heterosexist framework. Participants talked about regulation through an understanding of how their sexuality came to be regulated by family, in schools, by peers, and by their partners (especially within a male-privileged heterosexist context). Women worked to understand how these regulations had an effect on how they came to make decisions and on what it meant to be a sexual being. The work of understanding, negotiation, and resistance was all part of the process of emotional labor.

When women worked to understand these regulations, they performed emotional labor to negotiate messages about female sexuality that were often contradictory and always complex. In Chapter 5, I explored how women negotiated social expectations and structures that they understood within a binary context of being a good girl vs. a bad girl and the responsibility they felt pressured to take in maintaining a good girl image; their understanding produced emotional labor and affected the extent to which they exercised their sexual agency, which, in turn, involved resistance against social norms. Some women talked about their anxiety and struggle over trying to remain a good girl, while at the same time working to negotiate sexual experimentation as a new opening to their independence. Women's work in negotiation highlighted the ways in which they understood and engaged with their understanding of how they positioned themselves as a good girl and as a bad girl.

Chapter 6 explored the ways in which college was a perceived “bubble” within which women could exercise their sexual agency and engage in sexual exploration while building upon their sexual subjectivity. Whether women’s exploration happened through classes, peer dialogue in residence hall rooms and cafeterias, and/or in advocacy centers on campus, college opened up a number of ways in which women could further engage with their sexuality. They brought their work of understanding and negotiation into the fray of a less restricted, but still complicated, space: college. In my study, women not only understood how they were positioned in society as sexual objects, but also how they were silenced by regulatory standards, expectations, and curricula; for being outspoken is indeed work, wanting to be outspoken is work, and the exploration of what one desires is work. To exercise sexual agency in resistance to regulatory standards demanded this emotional work, and the process of emotional labor for the participants was always contested, gendered, and political. Understanding its complexities is significant in understanding sexual subjectivity and how women come to be educated (or not educated) within a dominant society.

To resist does not necessarily mean one must desire to be sexually active; but one must be *sexually subjective*. Overall, within the discussions women *talked about* how they understood the regulation of their sexuality, and how they worked to negotiate and then exercise their agency to resist. These three components were instrumental for the participants to be sexually subjective; and being sexually subjective required emotional work.

### **The Significance of Talk to Sexual Subjectivity**

The focus groups were the centrifuge of this study; there were places in which women's subjectivity came alive. I chose focus groups because I wondered how women spoke to each other about experiences they might have in common. I chose interviews because I wanted to address in more depth the issues that they raised so forcefully in the focus groups. Little did I know how significant these forms of data collection would be to my findings and that spaces for college women to talk about and explore the meaning of sexual activities in their lives are both necessary and missing. The participants clamored for non-evaluative spaces for discussing this issue. In this way, the methodology itself contributed to my findings.

After the focus groups and interviews were completed, I asked women to write reflections on their experience. Participants not only agreed that discussions like these should continue, but also agreed that that the experience had opened their eyes to their sexuality, how they heard others, and what it meant to be asked questions they were not normally asked. Sarah, a white lesbian from NU, noted:

After the first meeting [interview], I felt somewhat liberated, like I had purged some of my secrets in a way that couldn't be used against me. It was all the questions I had never been asked. It was the story that few people had heard or wanted to know. Sex linked my feelings of my body with my feelings on intimacy with my childhood and upbringing. In a way, it became the story of everything.

Sex was not just about sex. Like a spider web, it connected other ways in which women took notice of their identities—such as their race or their role within the family—of their selves and how they viewed themselves within the world. Beatrix, a white lesbian from NU noted:

For me, this discussion group was a really eye-opening experience. I'd never been in a situation where I could talk freely about sex with someone who was genuinely interested in what I had to say about the way I perceive sex and how I talk about it. I was realizing my beliefs as I spoke, and it helped me to solidify how I perceive sex and conversations about it.

Women's talk, without them realizing it, built upon their subjectivity. For some participants, it also affirmed their identity and exposed them to different ways they could be involved on campus. Stacey, a straight Puerto-Rican from NU, said:

It isn't every day that women of color are encouraged to talk about sex openly. It changed my feelings on how people can talk about sex. I realized that some of my own peers are going through the same things dealing with sexual taboos in our society. It made me want to get more involved with different centers around campus, because sex is a huge factor in lives of college students and not everyone is open enough to go discover information on their own.

Brooke, a white bisexual from NU responded, "I was grateful to have the opportunity to talk about bisexuality and how it pertains to me because I feel like a lot of people portray bisexual women as extremely promiscuous and "slutty."

Women not only felt affirmed by their talk but also by hearing from others. Their understanding illuminated their negotiation and their emotional work.

Participants called for more space to have programs that were similar to the focus groups I facilitated; an opportunity for women to talk openly about sex with other peers within a safe

space. It was not a peer mentor program per say, but it allowed for peers to speak back to each other on topics of sex, and to offer support and advice on topics of sex, sexuality, and sexual decisions. For example, Mindy, a straight, white 19-year-old from CSU said:

I feel like this [focus group discussion] needs to be done on a regular basis with college girls. I learned a lot and it makes me think about more, like last time I left I was like, “Ohmigod I need to go talk with the person I’m sleeping with,” like even more. It just brings up a lot of good things that like I assumed that, like I’m smart and everything and I’m doing everything right, but then it comes up more ideas of how this could be better, how I can be happier with myself in these ways. It’s just been very informative for me.

Within the focus groups, I would argue that Mindy and her peers did most of the work, talking through not just their decision-making, but also coming to understand themselves as sexual subjects. Mindy felt that the lines of communication about sex had been opened so much that she needed to go and speak more with her partner about the topic.

Not only did I find women’s reflections to be excellent feedback, but they verified the reasons why I had become interested in the topic initially. I believe that sexual health and other sex-related topics could be discussed in more depth on college campuses. Although date rape, sexual assault, and diseases are addressed at length, I am concerned with how women see and understand themselves as sexual subjects. Furthermore, parents and family members could benefit from more open discourse on sex and sexuality in the home. Although the possibilities for discussing sexuality vary from household to household, given a family’s moral and religious beliefs, it is evident that women wish to have more open space to talk about sex and the place of

sexuality within their lives. Parents, rather than leaving it to their daughters to start the conversation about sex, could benefit from directing these discussions initially by inviting their daughters to share their questions and concerns—while reserving judgment so that a safer space for conversation is created. Much of how women came to think about their sexual subjectivity out loud was only further perpetuated by their opportunity to participate in these discussions.

The idea of asking for a more inclusive understanding of sexuality in educational institutions and in society (such as the incorporation of the discussion of sexual desire, female sexuality, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual experiences into curriculum) is not new; theorists and researchers have been calling for a broader perspective on sexuality, and in particular “a focus on the development of healthy or positive sexuality that views involvement in sexual relationships as a normative transition and as a core developmental task of early adulthood” (Smiler, et al., 2005, p. 41).

To gain a better understanding of women relative to their prior and current experiences of sexuality, colleges would benefit from understanding young women within the historical and ideological context of their sexuality and the emotional work involved in their sexual decision-making. According to Fine and McClelland (2006), women are “educated as neither desiring subjects seeking pleasure nor potentially abused subjects who could fight back; young women are denied knowledge and skills and left to their own, and others’, devices in a sea of pleasure and dangers,” and therefore, young women’s bodies “bear the consequences of limited sexuality education and are the site where progressive educational and health policies can have significant effect” (2008, p. 298). Women enter college with a contradictory perspective of what sex is all

about, and in particular, how to negotiate their own sexual desire. College administrators and professionals could be helpful in the reconciling those contradictions through a further understanding of the negotiation of women's sexual desire and the discourses that shape their negotiation.

Today, college administrators have shifted their focus away from prohibiting students' sexual behavior to warning students about sexual assault and sexually transmitted diseases (Bogle, 2008). Now, most campuses allow virtually unrestricted access to the opposite sex, as compared to the gender specific dormitories and night curfews of the 1960s and '70s (Bogle, 2008). Although colleges may advertise a "hands-off" approach to the sexual decisions of their students, where does a college draw the line in getting involved with students' sexual decision-making? If there is little to no involvement by college staff and faculty (aside from providing access to resources relative to sexual health and medical support) when it comes to exploring *all* facets of sexuality, does this open space become so open that it is more harmful than helpful as students are left with little direction or guidance? As Donna Freitas (2008) argues, "Under these circumstances, students may end up as perpetual wanderers, finding it extraordinarily difficult to locate themselves in any one place to commit themselves to any one intellectual or moral framework" (p. 70). College programming, much like the focus groups, should open up programmatic initiatives to dialogue, safe spaces, and an opportunity for women—and men—to talk about sex in healthy, open ways.

College administrators and faculty alike should recognize the ways in which university life fosters the construction of women's sexuality; such recognition would help them build upon



their knowledge of working with and educating young women. Student affairs professionals must create opportunities and support for students to freely make their own decisions and define who they are. In addition, they must shape the environments that students live and work in by encouraging their awareness of their identity and the multiple experiences they explore at college (Jones, 1997). These strategies would continue to build upon the “safe spaces” that colleges have the opportunity and possibility to construct. Universities are often structured to be institutions that expose their campus communities to issues of difference; that approach needs to be carried over to how sex-related programmatic and educational initiatives are implemented. In the classroom, “there is a need for critical thinkers to engage multiple locations, address diverse standpoints and all of us to gather knowledge fully and inclusively (hooks, 1994, p. 91). This is not to say that colleges are not already engaged in and dedicated to this sort of work; my study is simply arguing that there is more work to be done.

In addition, by looking closely at women’s sexual subjectivity and emotional work sex educators and sexual health counselors would gain a better understanding of women’s sexual knowledge. Educators’ understanding would help in their interpretation of healthy sexuality relative to young women’s current and prior sexual educational experiences. Therefore, programmatic and curricular efforts could be *further* improved upon at the high school and college levels. Recognizing how university life fosters the construction of women’s sexuality should encourage educators’ efforts to educate high school-age women on issues of sexual health.

This research calls for the creation of more spaces where women can talk about sex and where conversations can be facilitated by adults (such as professional staff or faculty) who are knowledgeable in the areas of gender, sexuality, identity, identity construction, etc. The focus groups I held for public talk ended up demonstrating why such spaces are important to women's subjectivity. By highlighting the emotional labor of women's decision-making, one can see the complexities of how women negotiate their sexuality amidst the regulation and socialized messages they receive. Reflective dialogue can help frame ways in which faculty could develop their curricula, and staff could shape programmatic initiatives. It can also suggest new ways of thinking about how such spaces for dialogue might be physically created and facilitated on a college campus.

### **What's Missing and Implications for Future Research**

In the beginning, I talked about how I designed this study to involve participants of different races, sexual identities, classes, and backgrounds. I intentionally chose three different sites in order to capitalize on how I might recruit participants who were representative of the larger population. However, there were shortcomings on representation. For example, in the interviews and focus groups I did not directly ask women their socioeconomic status, nor did I ask a question about the impact their status might have had upon their sexual decision-making. However, as discussed earlier in Chapters 5 and 6, I read class in how women talked about their access (or lack thereof) to spaces and resources that allowed for them to engage with their sexual subjectivity. Furthermore, the ability to participate in activities and organizations that nurture subjectivity implies that participants had the time and money to do so. I did not take into account

women who perhaps might have had to work part-time in order to pay for their tuition, which would have limited their opportunities to participate in such initiatives and/or to attend an institution that offered such opportunities. This study also involved women who were residence hall students at some point in their college careers. Students' experiences would have been different if they were living at home, not having the privilege and opportunity to experience autonomy and agency in ways that their residential peers would.

In relation to race, although I had women of color in my research, I would have preferred to hear from more women who identified as Asian or Asian American. I understood that, perhaps because of cultural restrictions and/or background, the topic of this research may have inhibited Asian women from participating, but *because* of such cultural implications, the study would have been richer had more than one or two Asian-identified women participated. Furthermore, more research could be done on the interrogation of the *specific* complex work of women with sexual orientations other than straight, particularly experiences of trans-women that were not represented in this study. I realize that not all participants—black, white, Latina, gay, lesbian, bisexual or queer—were able to speak fully to the groups that they represented, and therefore I am not able to fully represent their worlds, identities, and relationships. As I argued previously, both women of color and LGBT women have to perform a different level of emotional work in comparison to their white, straight peers. Their work is complicated not only by society but by other institutions that affect the construction of their sexual subjectivity and the processes through which they understand their regulation, and negotiate and resist it. The emotional labor of decision-making among these populations warrants another study with a deeper analysis.

Finally, I was not able to hold focus groups with only lesbian, gay, and bisexual women and, therefore, these women were not able to participate in a discussion where they could share their experiences and thoughts with other lesbian, gay, and bisexual women. How might have their answers have varied if they had shared them within the context of a focus group? What other stories might have emerged from their discussions if prompted by peers with similar experiences? Perhaps an issue of trust in the researcher also served as a limitation. Would there be a stronger response from women to participate in the focus groups if they were more familiar with the person facilitating the discussion?

This study involved participants who volunteered to participate, which created a bias towards the study in regard to how women talk and think about sex. Participants understood that the purpose of the study was to talk about sex, and therefore at some level, these women had the *desire* to talk about sex and had a particular story to tell. But what about those women who saw my e-mails and my advertisements, or who attended the residence hall meetings and still chose *not* to participate? Perhaps these women did not see college as a bubble, but more of a public linkage to the outside world. What stories do those women have to tell? Perhaps there was a reason for their not participating: a feeling of discomfort, a wish to have their stories remain private, or simply a lack of time to participate. Perhaps it seemed too much work for them to share their thoughts and desires about sex and/or maybe they did not think that they had anything to contribute. Yet, the more the women who did participate *talked* about it, the more they understood that everyone's story about sex was different. As they shared how they were educated and raised, how they chose to explore and experiment, the relationships they were in,

participants' anxiety about whether they were "normal" fell away, and the determination to be themselves became that much more important. If there were to be a study that allowed us to hear (perhaps not as publicly) from the women who chose to remain silent, it would be interesting to see how their voices would add to the chorus.

Therefore, further research calls for bringing women who are silenced—or who feel silenced—into the conversation. What would research uncover about those who do not feel comfortable discussing sex among strangers, but yet might feel comfortable talking to one person? What might those reflective and thoughtful components of discourse look like? This study is meant to encourage the construction of spaces where all women can speak openly in regard to their sexual thoughts, behaviors, feelings, and subjectivity. To continue to add to these findings, to fold more voices into the conversation, would provide more robust and rich arguments for the incorporation of such spaces in—and outside—the college environment.

Another option would be to conduct research that would more deeply analyze the procedures involved in emotional labor. For example, what does the process of emotional labor look like specifically for decision-making and women's identity construction? These procedures could be more deeply analyzed, particularly in tandem with a study of a more specific population, such as women of color, queer women, or women who still live at home post-high school. Research that analyzes the process of emotional labor more deeply could elicit different ways of thinking of how people manage their behavior in terms of their identity *and* sexuality.

Rather than concentrating on students as subjects for further research, one could speak with college administrators, such as residence hall directors, student life deans, health educators,

women's resource directors, and the like, to understand how they might understand women's sexuality on campus. How might their perceptions of college life, particularly in regard to sex and sexuality, add to women's voices and their understanding of regulation, negotiation, and resistance? How do student life staff and administrators make sense of and align their work with women's sexual subjectivity? How do they understand women's sexual pleasure? A study that interrogates the decision-making and curriculum-and program-creation initiatives on campus would further the understanding of what place women's sexual pleasure and desire has on campus and how that might best inform development of—and changes to—policy and practice. For example, how should campuses respond to sexual harassment, and what should residence hall community standards agreements look like? Such a study could assist college educators and administrators in creating programmatic initiatives and curricula that involve both men *and* women in the conversation by engaging them holistically in what it means to have healthy sexual relationships, to respect others' space and privacy, and to affirm sexual identities. Furthermore, such studies might lead to the creation of opportunities on campus to explore men and women's attitudes, thus providing a sharper picture of the complexities involved in sexual decision-making and the shaping of sexual subjectivities.

My study contributes to the understanding of how college campuses have to change in order to address women's sexuality in its entirety—its complexities, multiple realities, and desires. As stated before, I have found much critical and regulatory discussion about female sexuality. However, in relation to the analysis of my data, it was not my intent to critique how the women in my study think about sex, as I believe that their discussion of their sexual decision-

making within the focus groups and interviews was on the whole critical and thoughtful. I am concerned with *why* they think about sex in the ways that they do and how their thought processes might shape a larger foundation for future research. The findings from this project will help educators to define and implement a more thorough sexual education curriculum that addresses the complexities of young women, their education, social backgrounds, and sexuality.

This dissertation challenges broader social discourses on female sexuality by investigating the process of emotional labor, women's understanding of how they are regulated as sexual beings, their negotiation of these regulations, and, finally, how college can maintaining itself as a safe space for resistance and exercising sexual agency. Educational movements that provide others with an understanding of how young women negotiate their sexuality and their sexual agency will help in the overall construction of young women sexually and socially (Fine, 1988). The ways that women continue to negotiate their sexuality based on their past experiences calls for further investigation into the stories that they tell. Society's ideas of sexuality do not occur in a vacuum. Therefore, it is important to try and tell stories that are representative of a diverse sample of women, to not only highlight the social forces and experiences that shape them, but also to allow "a given story's messy seams to show, let the many life threads that run through them remain visible" (Rose, 2003, p. 9). My research will help in exposing, engaging with, and deconstructing the boundaries that hinder how women are able to negotiate their sexual agency to the extent that they fully desire.

## EPILOGUE

*She stares straight ahead, her gaze unfaltering, into the great open; the open that has defined who she is to be sexually and emotionally. Her look is of defiance, her chin raised in stubbornness, her eyes focused and determined staring straight ahead, as she leans forward on one knee, as if to say, "I am who I am, you cannot control me." She is surrounded by her other female peers, also holding the same gaze locked onto their unknown audience, balanced in strong stances as if ready to pounce, tribal markings ceremoniously painted on their cheeks.*

*She is your daughter. She is your sister. She is your girlfriend. She is your friend. This girl "gone wild" has not yet shown you what it really takes. It is only the beginning.*

When walking through the halls of Center State University (CSU), I came across a poster for an upcoming dance performance at Northeast University (NU). In the photo, approximately five or six young women were grouped together, dressed in costumes that resembled the traditional tribal dress of Native Americans, their faces painted with vibrant colors and in such a way as to look fierce and powerful and, frankly, a bit wild. The women were of all races, all around the age of 20, of all shapes and sizes. Not one of them was smiling. Instead, they faced the camera with the sort of defiance that I described above. What stopped me in my tracks was that I recognized one of the women in the poster as one of my participants. I almost did not recognize her, as the last time I had seen her she was smiling, cheerful, and, at one point in the interview, tearful and emotional. In this photo, however, she looked stoic and fierce. I knew that



the photo had been taken in this way—with women dressed in these costumes and positioned as if ready to go to war—to purposefully pull in the audience, to advertise that particular dance performance and showcase the groups who would be performing that month. I did not hesitate in removing the poster, folding it up, and tucking it in my bag. I needed to see her like this. I needed to see all women like this: engaged, powerful, and in control. I needed to see them as I saw the women in the poster—as powerful agents of their own desire.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, K., & Jack, D. C. (1991). Learning to listen: Interview techniques and analyses. In S. B. Gluck & D. Patai (Eds.), *Women's words: The feminist practice of oral history*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ashcraft, C. (2003). Adolescent ambiguities in *American Pie*: Popular culture as a resource for sex education. *Youth & Society*, 35, 1, 37-70.
- Ashcraft, C. (2006). Ready or Not . . . ? Teen sexuality and the troubling discourse of readiness. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 37, 328-346.
- Aubry, E. J. (1998). The butt: It's politics, it's profanity, it's power. In Ophira Edut, *Adiós, Barbie: Young women write about body image and identity*. Seattle, WA: Seal Press.
- Bell, S. E., & Reverby, S. M. (2005). Vaginal politics: Tensions and possibilities in *The Vagina Monologues*. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 28, 430.
- Belle, D. (1994). Attempting to comprehend the lives of low-income women. In C. E. Franz & A. J. Stewart (Eds.), *Women creating lives: Identities, resilience, and resistance*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Bettie, J. (2003). *Women without class: Girls, race and identity*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bogle, K. (2008). *Hooking up: Sex, dating and relationships on campus*. New York: New York University Press.
- Boler, M. (1999). *Feeling power: Emotions and education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (1994). Shifting the center: Race, class, and feminist theorizing about motherhood. In E. N. Glenn, G. Chang, & L. R. Forcey (Eds.), *Mothering: Ideology, experience and agency*. New York: Routledge.
- di Mauro, D., & Joffe, C. (2009). The religious right and the reshaping of sexual policy: Reproductive rights and sexuality education during the Bush years. In G. Herdt (Ed.), *Moral panics, sex panics: Fear and the fight over sexual rights*. New York: New York University Press.

- Diamond, L. M. (2008). *Sexual fluidity: Understanding women's love and desire*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Downing-Matibag, T. M., & Geisinger, B. (2009). Hooking up and sexual risk taking among college students: A health belief model perspective. *Qualitative Health Research*, 19, 1196-1209.
- Duffy, Mark. "The Violent Exploitation Of Women In Fashion Continues...." *BuzzFeed*. N.p., 27 June 2013. Web. 29 July 2013. <[http://www.buzzfeed.com/copyranter/violence-against-women-in-fashion-continues-unabated?utm\\_source=buffer&utm\\_campaign=Buffer&utm\\_content=buffered080&utm\\_medium=facebook](http://www.buzzfeed.com/copyranter/violence-against-women-in-fashion-continues-unabated?utm_source=buffer&utm_campaign=Buffer&utm_content=buffered080&utm_medium=facebook)>.
- Ellis, C., Kiesinger, C. E., & Tillmann-Healy, L. M. (1997). Interactive interviewing: Talking about emotional experience. In R. Hertz (Ed.), *Reflexivity and voice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Evans, N. J., & Broido, E. M. (2002). The experiences of lesbian and bisexual women in college residence halls: Implications for addressing homophobia and heterosexism. In E. P. Cramer (Ed.), *Addressing homophobia and heterosexism on college campuses*. Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press.
- Eyal, K., & Finnerty, K. (2009). The portrayal of sexual intercourse on television: How, who, and with what consequence? *Mass Communication and Society*, 12(2), 143-169.
- Fine, M., & McClelland, S. I. (2006). Sexuality education and desire: Still missing after all these years. *Harvard Educational Review*, 76(3), 297-338.
- Fine, M. (1988). Sexuality, schooling, and adolescent females: The missing discourse of desire. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(1), 29-53.
- Freitas, D. (2008). *Sex and the soul: Juggling sexuality, spirituality, romance and religion on America's college campuses*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Friedman, A. (March 8, 2007). "Moral panic comes 'Un-Hooked.'" Retrieved from [http://www.campusprogress.org/articles/moral\\_panic\\_comes\\_unhooked](http://www.campusprogress.org/articles/moral_panic_comes_unhooked).
- Friedman, C., & Leaper, C. (2010). Sexual-minority college women's experiences with discrimination: Relations with identity and collective action. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 34, 152-164.

- Friedman, J., & Valenti, J. (2008). *Yes means yes! Visions of female sexual power and a world without rape*. Berkley, CA: Seal Press.
- Gmelch, S. B. (1998). *Gender on campus: Issues for college women*. Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Hamilton, L., & Armstrong, E. A. (2009). Gendered sexuality in young adulthood: Double binds and flawed options. *Gender and Society*, 23, 589-616.
- Heldman, C., & Wade, L. (2010). Hook-up culture: Setting a new research agenda. *Sexual Research and Social Policy*, 7, 323-333.
- Higher Education LGBT Support Services Map (January 2, 2010). Consortium of Higher Education Professionals, Retrieved from [www.lgbtcampus.org](http://www.lgbtcampus.org).
- Highmore, B. (2002). *Everyday life and cultural theory: An introduction*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Miller-Young, M. (2008). Hip-hop honeys and da hustlaz: Black sexualities in the new hip-hop pornography. *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Trans-nationalism*, 8, 261-292.
- Hirschman, C., Impett, E. A., & Schooler, D. (2006). Dis/embodied voices: What late adolescent girls can teach us about objectification and sexuality. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 3(4), 8-20.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Hoffman, E. (2007). Open-ended interviews, power, and emotional labor. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 36, 318-346.
- Holland, D. C., & Eisenhart, M. A. (1990). *Educated in romance: Women, achievement, and college culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hollander, J. A. (2004). The social contexts of focus groups. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 33, 5, 602-637.
- hooks, b. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation*. Boston: South End Press.
- hooks, b. (1994). Essentialism and experience. In bell hooks (Ed.), *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice to freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Hutchinson, S., Marsiglio, W., & Cohan, M. (2002). Interviewing young men about sex and procreation: Methodological issues. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12, 42-60.
- Hyde, A., Howlette, E., Brady, D., & Drennan, J. (2005). The focus group method: Insights from focus group interviews on sexual health with adolescents. *Social Science and Medicine*, 61, 2588-2599.
- Irvine, J. (1994). Cultural differences and adolescent sexualities. In J. Irvine (Ed.), *Sexual Cultures and the Construction of Adolescent Identities*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Irvine, J. (1995). *Sexuality education across cultures: Working with differences*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Irvine, J. (2005). *Disorders of desire: Sexuality and gender in modern American sexology*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Jones, S. R. (1997). Voices of identity and difference: A qualitative exploration of the multiple dimensions of identity development in women college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 38(4), 376-386.
- Kimble, M., Neacsu, A. D., Flack, W. F., & Horner, J. (2008). Risk of unwanted sex for college women: Evidence for a red zone. *Journal of American College Health*, 57(3), 331-338.
- Kulick, D. (1995). The sexual life of anthropologists: Erotic subjectivity and ethnographic work. In D. Kulick and M. Willson (Eds.), *Taboo: Sex, identity, and erotic subjectivity in anthropological fieldwork*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Littleton, H., Tabernik, H., Canales, E. J., & Backstrom, T. (2009). Risky situation or harmless fun? A qualitative examination of college women's bad hook-up and rape scripts. *Sex Roles*, 60, 793-804.
- López, N. (2003). From "Mamasita" to "Hoodlum": Stigma as lived experience. In *Hopeful girls, troubled boys: Race and gender disparity in urban education* (pp. 15-38). New York, NY: Routledge.
- McGruder, K. (2009). Black sexuality in the U.S.: Presentations as non-normative. *Journal of African American Studies*, 13, 251-262.
- Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Moran, J. P. (2000). *Teaching sex: The shaping of adolescence in the 20th century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Moffat, M. (1989). *The coming of age in New Jersey: College and American culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Morr, M. C., & Mongeau, P. A. (2004). First-date expectations: The impact of sex of initiator, alcohol consumption, and relationship type. *Communication Research*, 31(1), 3–35.
- Parvez, Z. F. (2006). The labor of pleasure: How perceptions of emotional labor impact women's enjoyment of pornography. *Gender and Society*, 20, 605–631.
- Paul, E. L., McManus, B., & Hayes, A. (2000). "Hook-ups": Characteristics and correlates of college students' spontaneous and anonymous sexual experiences. *Journal of Sex Research*, 37(1), 76–88.
- Phillips, L. M. (2000). *Flirting with danger: Young women's reflections on sexuality and domination*. New York: New York University Press.
- Pitcher, K. C. (2006). The staging of agency in *Girls Gone Wild*. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23(3), 200–218.
- Plummer, K. (1995). *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, change, and social worlds*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Raby, R. C. (2002). A tangle of discourses: Girls negotiating adolescence. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 5(4), 425–448.
- Regenerus, M., & Uecker, J. (2011). *Premarital sex in America: How young Americans meet, mate and think about marrying*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Richardson, D. (1993). Sexuality and male dominance. In D. Richardson and V. Robinson (Eds.), *Thinking feminist: Key concepts in women's studies*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Richardson, E. (2007). S'he was workin like foreal': Critical literacy and discourse practices of African American females in the age of hip hop. *Discourse and Society*, 18(6), 789–810.
- Rolon-Dow, R. (2004). Seduced by images: Identity and schooling in the lives of Puerto Rican girls. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 35(1), 8–29.

- Rose, T. (2003). *Longing to tell: Black women talk about sexuality and intimacy*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Scott, J. W. (1992). Experience. In Judith Butler and Joan Scott (Eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sieg, E. (2008). Empowered positions? Listening to sexually experienced young women talking about sex, disappointments, and compromise. *Health Education*, 10(1), 54–71.
- Smiler, A. P., Ward, M., Caruthers, A., & Merriwether, A. (2005). Pleasure, empowerment, and love: Factors associated with a positive first coitus. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy: Journal of NSRC*, 2(3), 41–55.
- Stepp, L. S. (2007). *Unhooked: How young women pursue sex, delay love and lose at both*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.
- Stewart, A. J., & Dottolo, A. L. (2005). Socialization to the academy: Coping with competing social identities. In G. Downey, J. S. Eccles and C. Chatman (Eds.), *Navigating the future: Social identity, coping, and life tasks*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Szymanski, D.M., Moffitt, L.B., & Carr, E. R. (2011). Sexual objectification of women: Advances to theory and research. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 39(1), 6-38.
- Tannenbaum, L. (2000). *Slut!: Growing up female with a bad reputation*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Tiefer, L. (1994). *Sex is not a natural act and other essays*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Tolman, D. L. (2002). *Dilemmas of desire: Teenage girls talk about sexuality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Tolman, D. L., Hirschman, C., Impett, E. A. (2005). There is more to the story: The place of qualitative research on female adolescent sexuality in policy making. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 2(4), 4–17.
- Tracy, S. J. (2005). Locking up emotion: Moving beyond dissonance for understanding emotional labor discomfort. *Communication Monographs*, 72(3), 261.
- Ward, J. V., & Taylor J. M. (1994). Sexuality education for immigrant and minority students: Developing a culturally appropriate curriculum. In J. Irvine (Ed.), *Sexual cultures and the construction of adolescent identities*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

- Warr, D. J. (2005). "It was fun...but we don't usually talk about these things": Analyzing sociable interaction in focus groups. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11(2), 200–225.
- White, A. M. (2006). Psychology meets women's studies, greets black studies, treats queer studies: Teaching diversity and sexuality across disciplines. *Feminist Teacher*, 16, 205–215.



## APPENDIX A

<u>PSEUDONYM</u>	<u>YEAR/AGE</u>	<u>RACE</u>	<u>SEXUAL ORIENTATION</u>	<u>SCHOOL</u>
"Michelle"	38	African American	straight	Upp. Lake Comm. College (ULCC)
"Alex"	22	South East-Asian	gay	ULCC
"Skye"	33	white	straight	ULCC
"Sandy"	18/freshman	white	straight	ULCC
"Sara"	did not say	white	straight	ULCC
"Isabelle"	18/freshman	white	straight	ULCC
"Marisa"	19/sophomore	white	straight	ULCC
"Missy"	19/sophomore	white	straight	ULCC
"Donna"	19/sophomore	white	straight	ULCC
"Mary"	18/freshman	white	straight	ULCC
"Megan"	18/freshman	white	straight	ULCC
"Marie"	19	white	straight	ULCC
"Renee"	18	white	straight	ULCC
"Anne"	19	white	straight	ULCC
"Beatrice"	19	white	lesbian	Northeast University (NU)
"Brooke"	21	white	bisexual	NU
"Johan"	19	white	lesbian	NU
"Sarah"	21	white	lesbian	NU
"Veronica"	20/junior	Puerto-Rican	bisexual	NU
"Emma"	19/freshman	white	queer	NU
"Sonia"	Freshman	African American	straight	NU
"Candy"	21	African American	straight	NU
"Cuse"	Senior	Korean	did not identify	NU
"Nicole"	21/senior	Dominican	straight	NU
"Vicky"	21	Dominican	did not identify	NU
"Casey"	Junior	African American	straight	NU
"Micah"	30/junior	African American	straight	NU
"Kristina"	20	Puerto-Rican	straight	NU
"Stacey"	Sophomore	Puerto-Rican	straight	NU
"Lindsay"	22/junior	Latina	did not identify	NU

"Molly"	23	white	straight	Center State University (CSU)
"Carla"	21	white	straight	CSU
"Maureen"	19	white	straight	CSU
"Alana"	19	white	straight	CSU
"Mindy"	19	white	straight	CSU
"Elisa"	20	white	straight	CSU
"Belinda"	19	white	straight/asexual	CSU
"Erica"	21	white	straight	CSU
"Colleen"	21	white	straight	CSU
"Eva"	19	white	straight	CSU
"Kirsten"	20	white	bisexual	CSU
"Penelope"	20	white	straight	CSU
"Tara"	19	white	straight	CSU
"Jane"	20	white	straight	CSU
"Lorraine"	20	white	straight	CSU
"Dara"	20	white	straight	CSU
"Melissa"	19	white	straight	CSU

## **APPENDIX B**

### Questions for One-on-One Follow-up Interviews:

1. I'm interested in how you have come to understand sex and its place in your life. How has your sexual education changed over time? (formal and informal)
2. In what ways do you feel that you have come to understand your sexual desires in college? What does sexual pleasure mean for you?
3. Tell me about what (and/or who) influences your sexual decisions. How has that changed (or not) over time?
4. How do you talk to your friends (and partners) about sex?
5. How do you talk to your family about sex?
6. What does it mean (to you) to be sexually healthy? What resources might you use to help maintain that health?



## APPENDIX C

### Questions for First Focus Group Session:

1. Tell us a little bit about yourself. How would people you know describe you?
2. Talk a bit about your family. What were their values/ideas regarding sex and sexuality?
3. When were you first introduced to sex education? Who first talked *to* you about sex? What did the conversation involve?
4. Describe your education about sexuality throughout your schooling (prior coming to college)? What in particular did you learn from this education?
5. Who did you talk with about sex? How private/public were these discussions? Where did they take place?
6. How might you use social networking to talk about sex? (tweet, Facebook, online chat, etc.). Describe.
7. How do you talk about sex with your friends? With your family?
8. When talking about sex, what emotions come into play? What was (is) it like emotionally for you to talk about sex?
9. How did your sexual education (formal and informal) change over time?

### Focus Group Questions for Second Session:

1. I'm trying to understand how you come to make decisions for yourself sexually. What influences you to make the decisions that you make?
2. In what ways have you come to understand your sexuality in college?
3. How do you talk to your friends/partners about sex? Your family?

4. I'm trying to get at how you learned about or come to understand your own sexual pleasure. By sexual pleasure, I mean, what do you enjoy, what feels good, etc. How do you understand your sexual pleasure?
5. From my experience in talking about sex with college women, it's hard for you (college women) to talk about sexual pleasure. How does it feel for you to talk about your own sexual pleasure?
6. How would you describe being "healthy sexually"? What are your concerns (if any) do you have about your sexual health?
7. What resources (on campus) are there available to you in regard to your sexual health?

*Leah A. Flynn*

*Vitae*

**Professional Experience**

**Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA**

**Assistant Dean and Director of Student Leadership and Engagement, Office of Student Activities**

- Directly supervises five professional staff in the areas of multicultural programs (including LGBT and women), leadership development, student group advising and event planning.
- Sets an organizational direction of the Student Activities Office including establishment of goals and priorities, standards of operation, program assessment and evaluation, strategic planning, and issue identification and resolution.
- Oversee the administrative infrastructure of the office including budgeting, personnel, and technology functions in coordination with the Division of Student Life administrative processes.
- Oversees and administer a budget of \$950,000.
- Oversees the development of a comprehensive and ongoing leadership training program for MIT student organizations and student leaders. Works with student leaders to identify the core areas of training, and assists with ongoing retreat and development activities.
- Facilitates a comprehensive program for diversity and student engagement; oversees the programming effort, student advisement, and organizational support for the Latino Cultural Center, Black Students' Union, Cheney Room (Women Space and Programming) and the Rainbow Lounge (LGBT Students).
- Oversees the strategic goals and programming efforts regarding women's support and programming. Establishes the policies regarding management and use of the Cheney Room as a women's program and support facility.
- Advises the Undergraduate Association (UA) and the Graduate Student Council (GSC) specifically in creating and maintaining a structure of support for student input and involvement in Institute decisions. Works with each organization and its leadership to be effective, representative governance bodies with specific attention to election processes and leadership development.
- Advises the Association of Student Activities (ASA) in their management of group recognition policies and processes as well as space and bulletin board assignment practices for 450+ student organizations.
- Develops and maintains effective management procedures and policies as they apply to student organizations consistent with Institute policy, including implementation of the MIT Alcohol Policy as it relates to student events. Addresses issues/conflicts as they relate to event policy or procedure.
- Responsible for the oversight of specific Institute programs, including the Multicultural Conference, Emerging Leaders Conference, Charm School, Student Leader Awards, Fall Festival, and Spring Weekend.
- Program Coordinator for the LeaderShape Program at MIT.

- Select and train student participants and coaches for the Community Catalyst Leadership Program, a leadership program that matches sophomore and junior students with alumni coaches and faculty. Develops curriculum for the program based on Kouzes and Posner's Five Exemplary Practices of Leadership.
- Serve as a LeaderShape Cluster Facilitator for MIT's LeaderShape Institute.
- Works collaboratively with Student Development and Support units, Division of Student Life departments, and Institute offices to research, design, and implement comprehensive, coherent, and consistent long-range plans in areas that impact students and student organizations. Specifically works with the Campus Activities Complex for space and event planning processes and with DAPER for club sports programs.
- Oversees the management of the student organization accounting function. Ultimately responsible for the auditing and accounting procedures, for monitoring expenditures, and for managing other issues related to student organization finances as well as capitalizing on the student learning that occurs with these organizational functions.
- Works with staff to ensure assessment and evaluation of the office goals and programs on a regular basis, including the inclusion of student input and feedback.

**Student Leadership Challenge**  
**Certified Facilitator**

**July, 2012/San Francisco, CA**

- Successfully completed the Student Leadership Challenge and Certified Facilitator Training in order to facilitate the Student Leadership Challenge, based upon Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner's Five Exemplary Practices of Leadership.

**SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, Syracuse, NY**

**Director, Office of Student Activities**

**February 2008 – October 2010**

**Assistant Director, Office of Student Activities**

**August 2002 - January 2008**

- Managed and implemented college wide events including Orientation, Commencement and Alumni and Parents weekend.
- Designed, implemented and assessed first year student experience program for new students (which includes academic, adjustment and social issues).
- Developed and facilitated educational programs focused on healthy relationships and alcohol and other drug use in coordination with the Office of Counseling and Disability Services.
- Supervised the Community Service and Service Learning Coordinator in the development and delivery of service-learning initiatives and co-curricular service projects.
- Supervised support staff and two graduate student interns.
- Served as lead for Student Life division in absence of Dean.
- Enforced and executed policy and procedures for student conduct within student organizations.
- Provided training, approval and oversight for all student functions including service of alcohol.
- Managed operating and programming budgets in excess of \$400,000.
- Coordinated student life "sessions" for all first year seminars in collaboration with faculty instructors.
- Trained and supervised 50+ Orientation Leaders.



- Supervised 12-15 mentors in their responsibilities of helping new students transition to college.
- Developed social, educational and leadership programs for all students.
- Served as a liaison with area colleges to exchange ideas and share bookings.
- Advised the Undergraduate Student Association (student government), yearbook and provide administrative oversight of 30 student organizations.

***Key Accomplishments:***

- Created ESF's First Year Experience Program, Evolutions, in order to assist with transitional issues including a focus on diversity, AOD education, community service, and leadership engagement.
- Created and implemented a "Saturday of Service" and First Year Service program for all incoming first year students.
- Developed and supervise a "Student-to-Student" Mentoring Program for first year students.
- Developed a college-wide action plan for the prevention and intervention of alcohol and drug use among students.
- Developed a "Club Travel Policy" for the college in accordance with SUNY policies and regulations.
- Established an Office of Civic Engagement on campus and made permanent a full-time staff member to oversee and coordinate the office's functions.
- Secured "student space" on campus for students to use as study and work space, for student organization meetings and storage space for student clubs and organizations.
- Worked closely with the Vice President of Enrollment and Marketing to establish an athletics program on campus.
- Implemented and chaired the committee for the 2010 Student Convocation Speaker.
- Worked with the Undergraduate Student Association to manage the largest student activity budget in SUNY ESF's history (doubled in size from the previous year) in accordance with the increase of the student activity fee.

**Nazareth College of Rochester, Rochester, NY**

**Assistant Director, Office of Admissions**

**August 1998 – July 2001**

*promoted from Admissions Counselor*

Nazareth College of Rochester, Rochester, NY (8-98-7/01)

- Selected, trained and supervised up to 60 student ambassadors.
- Responsible for off-campus recruitment activities in key geographical areas.
- Conducted interviews and participated in team meetings to review candidate status.
- Coordinated all off-campus events, including staff retreats and programs with school counselors.
- Served as a liaison with the Alumni Office to organize all volunteer recruitment participation.

## RELATED EXPERIENCE

### Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

#### **Graduate Assistant, Center for Public and Community Service      August 2001 – August 2002**

- Assisted with the recruitment and hiring of 120 student tutors for local elementary schools.
- Provided and assisted tutors with tutor pre-service training, on-going training and supervision.
- Facilitated critical reflection processes with tutors to connect practice to theory relative to diversity education.
- Developed and implemented a tutor training program about adapting computer skills for children.
- Presented workshops on community service and leadership to 120 student tutors.

#### **Intern, Office of Athletic Advising, Department of Athletics      January 2002 – May 2002**

- Served as an academic advisor for a caseload of four academically at-risk student athletes.
- Co-advised the Student Athlete Council of approximately 12 members.
- Co-facilitated community service programming for student athletes.
- Assisted in the development of support plans for academically at-risk student athletes.

## COLLEGE TEACHING

### **Co-Instructor, From Good to Great; Women in Leadership**

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston, Ma

**August 2011- present**

- Provide leadership and instruction to first year women students in a freshman seminar class on issues of leadership development, guiding principles of leadership, and it's connection to the STEM field
- Develop curriculum based upon the Social Change Leadership Model
- Work collaboratively with two other co-instructors on planning and class facilitation

### **Instructor, Leadership Through Mentoring**

**August 2003 – October 2010**

SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, Syracuse, NY

## COLLEGE TEACHING

### **Co-Instructor, From Good to Great; Women in Leadership**

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston, Ma

**August 2011- present**

- Provide leadership and instruction to first year women students in a freshman seminar class on issues of leadership development, guiding principles of leadership, and it's connection to the STEM field
- Develop curriculum based upon the Social Change Leadership Model
- Work collaboratively with two other co-instructors on planning and class facilitation

**Instructor, Leadership Through Mentoring**

**August 2003 – October 2010**

SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, Syracuse, NY

- Provide leadership and instruction in mentoring and assisting first year students in their transition to college.
- Supervise 12-15 student mentors in their responsibilities of mentoring first year students.

**Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Qualitative Research**

**August 2009**

Department of Cultural Foundations of Education, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

**Instructor, Youth, Sex and Videotape: Pop Culture and Education**

**August 2008**

Department of Cultural Foundations of Education, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

**Teaching Assistant, Youth, Schooling and Pop Culture**

**Spring Semester 2006**

Department of Cultural Foundations of Education, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

**Instructor, Service Learning Community, Center for Public and Community Service Fall 2002 and Spring 2003**

Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

- Restructured and developed the syllabus for a one-credit reflection course on service learning.
- Co-instructed a seminar on service learning to upper division students participating in a residential learning community.

**PRESENTATIONS**

**“Conflict Resolution”, Black Student Union Leadership Retreat, MIT, Boston, MA (11/12) *presenter***

**“Sink or Swim? Drowning in Leadership Overload”**, National Committee on Student Leadership Conference, Boston, MA (3/12), *co-presenter*

**“Angelina, Beyonce, and Sarah Palin: Feminist or Foe? Pop Culture and the Role of Feminism in Society”**, Multicultural Conference, MIT, Boston, MA, (2/11), *co-presenter*

**“From Hook-ups to Headaches: Theorizing the Emotional Labor of College Women’s Sexual Decision Making”**, Thinking Gender Conference, UCLA, Los Angeles, California (2/08) *presenter* and Gender and Education Conference, University of London, London, United Kingdom (3/09) *presenter*

**“Knowing the Whole Story: The Importance of Critical and Cultural Awareness in Leadership Positions”**, Leadership Workshop Series, Onondaga Community College, Syracuse, NY (10/07) and SUNY Student Assembly Conference, Auburn, NY (5/08), *presenter*

**“Learning a New Language for Progress: Faculty “Speak” vs. Student Affairs “Speak”**, Living and Learning Community Conference, Syracuse, NY (10/06), *co-presenter*

**“Multicultural Education and Service Learning: A Powerful Combination?”**, National Association for College Student Personnel Administrators Conference, Washington, DC (3/06), *co-presenter*

**“Extreme Makeover: From Learning Community Initiative to Campus Culture Change”**, Living-Learning Programs and Residential Colleges Conference, Indiana University, Indianapolis, Indiana (11/04), *co-presenter* & College Student Personnel Association of New York State conference, Syracuse, NY (10/06), *co-presenter*

**“The Shared Journey: Young Women in Student Affairs and Their Mentors”**, National Association for College Student Personnel Administrators Conference, St. Louis, Missouri (3/03), *co-presenter*

**“Community Service: Turning Obligations into Opportunities”**, Syracuse University Greek Leadership Conference, Syracuse University, Syracuse NY (10/01), *facilitator*

**“Teambuilding & Motivation”**, COMPASS Leadership Workshop Series, Office of Greek Life and Experiential Learning, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, (11/02, 4/03), *co-facilitator*

**“Determining Your Leadership Style”**, Nazareth College Leadership Conference, Nazareth College, Rochester, NY, (1/03), & Syracuse University Literacy Corps Tutors Workshop, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY (11/01, 3/02), *facilitator*

**EDUCATION****Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Foundations of Education**

*Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY August 2013*

**Certificate of Advanced Study, Women's Studies**

*Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY Spring 2008*

**Masters of Science in Higher Education Administration**

*Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY May 2003*

**Bachelors of Arts in Sociology**

*Nazareth College of Rochester, Rochester, NY May 1998*